

Sometimes in life our greatest blessings bear a close relation to our greatest fears.

The achievement of a happy marriage, for example, may mean having to confess an embarrassing habit we'd been able to keep to ourselves all these years. Having a baby compresses into one day more painful breathing and prodding doctors than some people endure in a lifetime. Graduating from college in a certain degree program may require that we take at least one class from a man known only as the Time Bandit.

In similar fashion one of the most powerful components of our relationship with Christ incorporates a fear most of us bring with us from about the fifth grade on—the fear of being tapped for an assignment far above our skill level, being given a special task we're not sure we can accomplish, being made to feel different, vulnerable, or exposed.

But when the Holy Spirit sets us apart for himself, when he gives us a job that alarms us with scope, sacrifice, and complexity, he's really inviting us to experience the nearness to him we've always wanted. In the midst of fear . . . ultimate fulfillment.

Read Isaiah 61:1-6, 9

Try putting yourself in this scene. It's nighttime, the third evening since Jesus has been dead. There hasn't been much sleep in the last few days. About an hour at a time, maybe. No more than two. Even then, every creak and rustle has been magnified out of measure. If Christ's apostles had ever felt on top of the world, this is how it must have felt to be completely underneath it. The pressure. The panic. The pulsing, racing heartbeat that pounds in your palms, your temples, your eye sockets.

All eleven of you are still there in one room. All but the one whose eerie absence casts an even darker pall on this whole situation. And everyone has reverted to their own basic survival mode.

Some have sat quietly, brooding, thinking. Others have nervously jumped from one mood to the next—sometimes looting frantic, sometimes fatigued, always fidgety. The doors are locked, mostly to keep people out but partly because you don't know where you'd go if the doors were open.

Then suddenly—Jesus is there! Not just a presence but a person. He uncurls his hands, revealing real lacerations, right where the nails had sliced through. He pulls back his robe, pointing to a clean wound the identical size of a spear blade.

Then in holy silence he closes his eyes, lifts his hands, purses his lips, blows a warm steady breath into the air, and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22)

Knees nearly buckle. There's a tingling on each arm, vibrating through every pore of skin. This is power. This is riveting! (Blink your eyes. Swallow hard.) And it's real!

Men On A Mission

We may not be able to feel it just the way the Eleven did in that electric moment, face-to-face with Jesus, dealing with both the immediate shock of his resurrected presence and the rush of his Spirit at the same time.

But in every bit the same manner, we who have trusted in the risen Christ have been commissioned and sealed with his Spirit, just as the first apostles were. We have been set apart—"consecrated," to use a good Bible word—chosen for holy purposes and placed in the Spirit's safekeeping.

That's not to say that "safe" is always a fitting description for how it feels to be stamped with his approval and blessing. When the Spirit said to the leaders of the Antioch church, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work that I have called them to" (Acts 13:2), that work involved things like being pummeled with rocks, dragged out of the city, and left for dead. Yet the Spirit continued to inspire and sustain them, pulling them up off the deck and back into duty, enabling them joyfully to proclaim the gospel . . . like people who had truly and finally learned what life was all about.

Good And Ready

So if self-esteem is something that's always come hard for you, let this spiritual birthright feel like the honor it is—a placement of value, not on what you do or how you look or where you live but on who you are. The Holy Spirit has crowned your head with eternal blessing and approval. He has set you apart and counted you among his favored ones.

Likewise, if risk and unease is something you avoid like the measles, try coming to grips with the fact that this life is pretty much nothing but risk and unease . . . for everybody! But those who've been sanctified by the Spirit of God are no longer bound by the confining limits of eighty years and a nest egg. In him we have been given forever—already!—complete with all the privileges and peace dividends that come with eternal security.

It won't be easy. It won't be ice cream. It won't be "a place for everything and everything in its place." It won't always fit on its own designated line in your DayTimer.

But it will be your earthly taste of purpose and destiny, your experience of true calling and meaning. The Spirit's blessing will be worth every peril and will take you where you really want to be.

Isaiah 61:1 "He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty. . .and freedom."

The Spirit will always task us with weighty assignments. What are some he's given you?

Isaiah 61:6 "You will be called the Lord's priests . . . ministers of our God."

In what ways does the Spirit call us to live out this mission? Why is ministry an obligation for all of us?

Isaiah 61:9 "All who see them will recognize that they are a people the Lord has blessed"

How do you "recognize" the Lord's blessing on others? How do they spot it in you?

The Spirit sets us apart for special service. If this were all about talent, the plan of salvation would have come with an audition and an application procedure. If it were all about smarts, it would've been worked up as a standardized test with all kinds of qualifying percentiles for acceptance. But actually, it's all about the Spirit, who not only calls us into his service but also gives us everything we need to carry it out.

Spirit of God, sometimes you scare me, but always you love me. I can't do all you ask, but I know you can do it in me.