

Meditation on Romans 1:4

By Dr. T. Van Raalte

“who through the Spirit of holiness
was declared with power to be
the Son of God by his resurrection”

This meditation focuses upon the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, as accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit. We begin with an Old Testament prayer for the leading of the Holy Spirit. If you know the tune of Psalm 143 in the *Book of Praise*, perhaps you will find yourself singing along to the following stanzas.

4. LORD, see my hands to you extending;
I thirst for you, on you depending.

My spirit faints. Hide not your face,
or I will be like those descending
down to the gloom of death's abyss.

5. Your face in love towards me turning,
show me your mercy in the morning.
I trust in you for my support.

Teach me your way and guide my learning:
to you I offer all my heart.

6. LORD, save me from my foes forever;
to you, my Rock, I flee for cover.
Teach me your will: you are my God.

Let your good Spirit, O my Saviour,
lead me along a level road.

In stanza four we sing of our dependence on Yahweh, using the expressions that we thirst for him, that our spirit faints, that we will be like those descending to the gloom of death's abyss if he does not show his face (his grace). In stanza five we ask for God's face to shine on us this morning as the exam period begins and we pray, "Teach me your way and guide my learning." How fitting at this time! That stanza ends with the phrase made famous by John Calvin's seal, "To you I offer all my heart." We pray that all of us here will be able to continue with our work under that beautiful motto, also during these two weeks of exams.

Stanza six asks God to save us and teach us his will. Then we sing, "Let your good Spirit, O my Saviour, lead me along a level road." It is this leading of the Spirit that comes out very nicely in

Romans 6:4, and it is the role of the Holy Spirit in the glorious resurrection of our Saviour that holds our attention now.

I know that we are all in need of strengthening. We just celebrated the love of our God in our Saviour's death for us and the power of God in our Lord's resurrection. I was praying for us all, that we might be renewed in faith, hope, and love. I was in much need of that myself.

Let us look to our God for the leading of his Spirit of life. "Let your good Spirit, O my Saviour, lead me upon a level road." Who is the God we serve? Will he ever fail us? Does he not supply the life that is truly life (John 10)?

What is "life"? What is "spirit"? Back in my days as a seminary student, we had to memorize Isaiah 31:3, "**The Egyptians are men and not God; their horses are flesh and not spirit.**" What a wonderful commentary on the passage through the Red Sea! The Egyptians were only fleshly men and horses. It was an unequal match. They were not merely trying to catch some flesh-and-blood Hebrew slaves, but were trying to withstand the God who had commanded "Let my first-born son go, or I will kill your first-born sons!" The Egyptian cavalry failed before the God who is pure Spirit, whose might is without limit, whose life has no beginning or end, who as Spirit is life itself. Spirit is life.

We know that God's Spirit is life because when God breathed in man's nostrils, the man became a living being (Gen 2:7). God's Spirit gave life and animated the body. Just as the Spirit had hovered over the watery depths in the beginning (Gen 1:2), prepared to give life and order, so God specially imparted his Spirit-breath into the dust-mud corpse and gave him life. Two distinct steps occurred to bring man into being as man. First, the material reality, then the life that animated it.

It seems that Elihu in the Book of Job was reflecting upon this when he stated, "But it is the spirit (*ruah*) in a man, the breath (*nishmah*) of Shaddai, that gives him understanding" (Job 32:8). He gave even more credit to the Holy Spirit when he said, "**The Spirit (*ruah*) of God has made me; the breath (*nishmah*) of Shaddai gives me life**" (Job 33:4). If the Spirit even made or fashioned Elihu, and if we apply such a statement to Adam, it seems that Adam was hardly worthy of being called Adam when he was but a corpse. The influx of the Spirit, the breath, is what really constituted him as Adam. He had to live, and to live he needed the Spirit of God. Clearly life is from the Spirit. The Spirit gives life and understanding. Elihu also states this in the negative, saying that if it were God's intention and he "withdrew his spirit (*ruah*) and breath (*nishmah*), all mankind would perish together and man would return to the dust" (Job 34:14–15).

In the Nicene Creed we confess that we "**believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life.**" What an encouraging confession when we feel tired and lack vitality! Once, when Jesus disciples

thought that he was telling them that they had literally to eat his physical flesh, Jesus corrected them, saying, **“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life”** (John 6:63). Jesus thus ties his own words which proceed from his own mouth, with the very breath of God. Jesus, the Logos, gives life by speaking. The Spirit of life proceeds from him, even in his ministry prior to his death and resurrection. “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (John 6:63). God’s words supply strength. That’s why we are meditating upon them!

We worship the God of life. Jesus said, **“God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth”** (John 4:24). To worship in spirit must at least mean to involve your whole self, your very life, starting from the core, pressing all into the worship of God. The worship must not be a mere formality but a meaningful, heartfelt exercise. Unlike pagan gods, Yahweh knows our hearts and requires the devotion of those very hearts that he formed and made. “To you I offer all my heart.”

How shall we draw links from these texts and ideas to the resurrection of our Lord? Not by replacing the divine nature of the Second Person with the Holy Spirit. A Spirit Christology of that kind is quite simply heretical. But we do need to see the close inter-relations and united working of the Holy Persons of the Trinity.

In Romans 1:4, Paul opened his letter by speaking of our Lord in two stages, first as the one descended from David according to the flesh, and in this sense subject to death and weakness, but then as the one who was determined by God to be that which is **“Son of God with power”** and he was so marked out **“according to the Spirit of holiness by resurrection.”** This second stage did not cause our Lord to *become* the Son of God or to obtain a divine nature. Rather, his resurrection set out the historical reality that he now had the power of an indestructible life in accordance with “the Spirit of holiness.” This new post-resurrection status of our Lord gave great substance to the declaration and determination of God that he was the Son of God. Indeed, I don’t think Paul means that he was the Son of God merely in his divine nature, but that in his divine-human nature, with the human nature having reached the second stage of incorruptibility, he could be declared “Son of God” in the fullest sense.

“The first Adam became a living being; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit” (1 Cor 15:45). This life-giving spirit, named Jesus Christ, has made resurrection possible for us, **“It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body”** (1 Cor 15:44). The body that is thoroughly and entirely inhabited by the Spirit of God becomes incorruptible, immortal, and glorious (1 Cor 15:43).

In Romans 6:4 the Spirit leads Paul to write about us being buried with Christ through baptism into death **“in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”** We know that this new life is only possible for us by the Holy Spirit.

But what does it mean that Christ was raised by the “glory of the Father”? His glory surely is his power, his omnipotence (Col 1:11). But how does God work his power? What is his power? Is it not his *spiritual* power that is in view? If God is Spirit and Spirit is life, and if spirit is contrasted to flesh and to Egyptian horses, then surely that which is *spirit* is also that which is power. Might it be that when Paul speaks of Christ being raised by the “glory” of the Father he means something very close to the “Spirit” of the Father? There are some very fertile connections here that we could explore further if we had time.

I think of Ezekiel receiving a vision of “the appearance of the likeness of the glory of Yahweh” (Eze 1:28). He fell down as though dead. But the divine voice told him, “Son of man, stand up on your feet and I will speak to you.” Could Ezekiel do this? No! But God did. **“As he spoke, the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet”** (Eze 2:1). Later the Spirit would lift him up again, to make him firm and strong and fearless as a prophet, to give him life and power and strength to preach and prophesy (compare Eze 3:12; 8:3; 11:1, 5; Rev 11:11–12). The same Spirit of God would enter the skin-and-bone people of Ezekiel’s vision in chapter 37 and cause them all to stand on their feet. God would make a new people for himself. This is what he has done in Christ Jesus our risen Lord. The Spirit of God is the instrumental cause of the resurrection of Christ, as Geerhardus Vos (1862–1949) has argued.

This is what the Spirit did for the corpse in the grave early on that Sunday morning almost 2000 years ago. **God gave life and caused his Son to stand on his feet and to be declared with power to be the Son of God in fulness.**

I pray that each of us would seek from the risen Christ this very Spirit of wisdom and counsel, of encouragement and strength—the Spirit of life, that is, the Spirit who is life itself. In Christ, in your union with him, this gift is yours. You and I need strength for these times. We will receive it.

Let us call to mind the promise of the Holy Spirit in Isaiah: **When the Spirit is poured out from on high, then, “the desert becomes a fertile field, and the fertile field seems like a forest.** Justice will dwell in the desert and righteousness live in the fertile field.” The effect will be peace, quietness, confidence (Isa 32:15). This is a picture of resurrection, of new life out of death. God’s Spirit will make his people “spring up like grass in a meadow, like poplar trees by flowing streams” (Isa 44:3).

For all our tiredness, the chaos in our minds, and the fear in our hearts, the Spirit of Jesus Christ will make us sharp, clear, and bold.

The life, strength, and encouragement that busy Christians need has been given to us by the same Spirit whose power raised our Lord Jesus from the dead.