

New Identity in the Spirit

Numbers 11: 24-30

Galatians 5: 13-16, 22-25

The time is approaching for me. The fateful day is only two months away when I will need to sojourn to the Tax Collector's Office and prove my identity in order to get my driver's license renewed. Back in the good old days, about 8 years ago when my beard was dark and my skin less blotchy and my hair not showing any gray and my countenance less haggard, all I did was show them my old license, see that my face and signature basically matched, and maybe produce some other ID like a credit card or a library card, and – *voila* – I was standing behind the blue screen for my new license picture, the magical laminated version issued within minutes.

In this era, when nothing is what it appears to be, when all things are questioned, facts themselves are in dispute, and reality is a false narrative, I must prove to them that I am who I say that I am. It makes one wonder what a modern Moses would require from God for identification; I can't believe that he would take God's word that the name of the deity was *I am who I am – Yahweh*. "Prove it," a modern Moses would demand.

The good thing for us is that God knows who we are. There's no fooling God, no need for identity paperwork. However, we are the ones who struggle to know who God is. And we struggle to understand what God wants us to do and to become.

As we've worked our way through Jesus's post-resurrection appearances and his promises of the Holy Spirit in one form or another, the day has come when the Holy Spirit bursts upon the disciples in the upper room. It's all described in vivid detail in Acts 2, and you should be familiar with that passage.

We also know that the Holy Spirit has been around since the beginning, having been mentioned in the Creation story in Genesis. And the Holy Spirit made other appearances in the Hebrew scriptures of the Old Testament. One memorable occasion was in Numbers 11 (yes, there are things in the book of Numbers besides numbers).

We come to this passage and find a frustrated Moses. He has just finished belly-aching to God about his mission. Moses is over these insufferable, whiny people whom God has put in his charge. Moses believes that if these cranky lugheads had all they wanted, they'd still complain that it wasn't enough. Moses needs help to deal with this cantankerous group of sojourners.

God replies to Moses: *Is the Lord's arm too short?* God is prepping Moses for a bit of a show.

Moses brings the elders to the Tent, the tabernacle – their mobile worship center.

As the presence of the Lord came down in a cloud, Moses was somehow able to take the Spirit of God from himself and place it on the seventy elders present. The result was that the elders began prophesying. We don't know exactly what such prophesying

means here in the Old Testament any more than we know exactly what happened at Pentecost when a similar thing may have happened. In any case, the 70 are put in an exceptional spiritual state. It happened only this one time.

Now, you will note that 70 is an unusual number because it lacks numeric symbolism. It would be much better if the number were a factor of twelve, like the twelve tribes of Israel and that sort of thing. Well, then we discover that 2 of the elders didn't go to the tent of meeting, the tabernacle. Ah, now it makes sense – there were supposed to be 72 elders there!

The center of attention now turns to the 2 absentee elders. Moses' act to place the Spirit on the elders somehow escaped outside the tent and even reached the 2 missing elders, Medad and Eldad. God is something else, right? These two guys begin prophesying much to the surprise of a young observer who runs over to Moses and Joshua, Moses' right hand guy. This observer tells them about it, and Joshua is appalled. Joshua urges Moses to stop them from prophesying. Moses dismisses his complaint by saying that he wished **all** of God's people were prophesying, and that was the end of the matter.

Even if Moses didn't realize that he was missing two of the elders, the Spirit of God knew what was going on and covered Moses' intention by finding the ones who were readily identifiable as elders and making sure that the Spirit came upon them, too. The elders may not have been identified as missing by Moses, but the Spirit knew who they were and where to find them. Those two elders got identified by the Spirit of God, and manifested the same prophesying that all the other elders produced.

In this case, the Spirit comes to those designated by God and Moses for service to God's will and purpose. There is no omission and there is no mistake. Having attained roles of service, acknowledged as elders by their faith commitment, the Spirit comes upon them and anoints them in power and authority. I simply wish we actually knew what was happening when they prophesied.

That's what we really want to understand: what happens when the Spirit comes to the faithful? We can share in the amazing imagery of Pentecost from Acts, but I'm willing to wager that none of us has quite experienced that happening to us: a massive windstorm, something like tongues of fire on each disciple, and the spontaneous utterance of a foreign language, or whatever prophesying means. Yet we would also most likely acknowledge sensing the presence of God's Spirit around us or around others at some time or other, even though we never had such a breathtaking event in our lives to announce the presence of the Spirit upon us or with us.

To take a different approach, I thought we could turn to Paul. He talks about the gifts of the Spirit in First Corinthians chapter 12. It's helpful, but Paul is really addressing a divisive matter in the congregation of Jesus people at Corinth. He isn't exactly addressing the effects of the Spirit on the faithful individual.

There is another place where Paul talks about the Spirit: in his letter to the churches in Galatia. Our New Testament lesson is Galatians 5.

You'll recall that this is Paul's hot letter; he's hopping mad because Peter is making a mess of things, trying to suggest that you need to be a good Jew in order to follow Jesus. Paul will have none of that, and blasts off this letter.

By chapter 5, he seems to have gotten the anger out of the way, and his language takes a less irritated and more focused tone. Paul is still upset to think that the Galatians have been turned toward Judaism and the Torah-Law, but he is making his case now.

Let's remember that, when Paul talks about sinfulness, he is talking about the problem with practicing Jewish Torah-Law. All the Law can do is point out and produce an endless cycle of sinfulness. Human efforts seek to establish their own righteousness by right performance of the Law. However, since righteousness is inevitably undone by sinfulness, and one cannot create one's own righteousness.

Therefore, Paul urges the Galatians to live in the freedom that they've obtained by their faith in Jesus, their freedom from the Torah-Law as well as freedom from the lives they had lived before their profession of faith in Jesus. He emphasizes love for one another as needing to be the priority in their conduct as a community of faithful witnesses. Quoting Leviticus as Jesus did, Paul says, *The whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'*

He urges them to "live by the Spirit." After detailing all of the sinfulness of the worldly nature, sins of the flesh and selfish conceit, Paul then enumerates the characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit.

Number one is love, following up the emphasis he laid out previously. To be in Christ is to be embraced by the love of God, the love of the Lord, and empowered in love by the Spirit.

Joy and peace describe the state of mind of the person in the Spirit. In this, a person knows their blessings and their source, bringing them a ready state of joy. In joy and in love, they are anchored in peace. They're unencumbered by conflicts, misgivings, doubts, and fears, able to maintain peace in their life experience.

Love, joy, and peace are a natural foundation, it seems to me. But what comes next?

Patience. Love, joy, and peace in the Spirit bring a release from urgency, from the need to control, from the demands of the self for gratification and satisfaction. Patience allows space for God and the Spirit to work, not insisting on having things my way or according to my schedule and determination. Behind patience lies a certain measure of humility.

Kindness and goodness reflect a generosity in personal spirit as the Spirit of God provides assurance, direction, and a consideration for others.

Faithfulness – ever seeking to remain true to God, for the presence of the Spirit of God is a ready reminder of who it is that you serve and who has blessed your life in the Lord.

Gentleness and self-control combine the humility behind patience together with the generosity behind kindness and goodness and consideration of others. There is awareness in the Spirit that is restrained, sensitive, and tries not to overpower or control or take advantage.

Paul has compiled the essentials of how an identity in the Spirit should appear. He holds this up as a mirror for the Galatians who have become divided over the issues of living a faithful life in the Lord. Paul tries to get them focused away from the worldly ways that have provoked division and discord, enmity and self-serving ambitions. He brings them to the fruits of the Spirit, something that has to be far more desirable than what they've received from their remaining wedded to the ways of the world.

In the same manner, the ways of the Lord are presented to us. We should reckon our identity in the Spirit of God. Love, joy, and peace. Patience, kindness, and goodness. Faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. As Paul says to them and to us: *Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*