

THE SPIRIT WITHIN CHAPTER ONE

THE QUEST FOR MORE

HOW CAN IT BOTHER YOU if it is not even there?

Maybe you have experienced it. Many people have reported the phenomenon. It was even given a name more than a decade ago.

One day, Heather, a mother of three from Pittsburgh, was talking on her cell phone to her mother—a regular occurrence. Suddenly, she felt her phone vibrate in her hip pocket, where she always kept it when not using it. She reached for her phone, but it was not in her pocket. She stood, but she had not been sitting on it. She spun and looked all around for several minutes as she continued her conversation with her mother.

"Ugh," she said finally. "I can't find my phone."

Her mother laughed.

"What?" Heather was sure she felt the phone buzz in her pocket, but now it was nowhere to be seen. "Why are you laughing?"

"Honey, how are you talking to me?"

Heather pulled the phone away from her ear and looked at it, shaking her head. She returned it to her ear.

"Wow, I'm an idiot," she said, and mother and daughter shared a laugh together.

It is called "phantom vibration syndrome," and there are many theories as to what causes it, though so far no one has settled it conclusively.

Many otherwise happy and mature followers of Jesus Christ report a similarly mysterious experience. It has nothing to do with cell phones or technology, however. Rather, it is a fleeting, lingering sensation that something is missing. Something important. Something more.

Lives of Quiet Dismay

In his classic work *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau said famously, "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation."¹ And hold the jokes right there; he was not just talking about married men. In fact, he was not even referring only to men. He intended to include the entire human race in that appraisal. He meant people. Everywhere.

But, you may be thinking, *followers of Jesus should not be included in such a statement*. Right? Some of us are seldom quiet, to begin with, but more importantly, those who have experienced new life in Christ ought to be the least desperate and most fulfilled people on earth. After all,

The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ... has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his

will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment-to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

Ephesians 1 :3-10

That seems like a lot to be happy about, right? I mean, come on:

The Father ... has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Colossians 1:12-14

What more could we ask for? Why should we ever feel defeated or dismayed or dissatisfied?

And yet, if we are honest, many of us do feel this way-at least at some level. We are forgiven, redeemed and blessed. We love God, we follow Jesus, we pray and read our Bibles and so on, but we still suffer from the spiritual equivalent of phantom vibration syndrome-an occasional sensation that something should be there ... but it is not.

Maybe Jesus' first followers suffered from the same malady. On one occasion, a man brought his son to Jesus for healing. Jesus was not there, but the man located a few of Jesus' disciples. He told them that his son was possessed by a demon that had robbed the boy of speech and would throw him to the ground writhing, foaming at the mouth and grinding his teeth. So the disciples-who had been following Jesus for some time and had even witnessed, preached and traveled the countryside performing miracles in Jesus' name-tried to call the demon out of the boy. And failed.

Soon after, Jesus came onto the scene, and the father explained his son's predicament and the disciples' failed efforts. Jesus rolled his eyes. Okay, so the Bible does not say that. But it does indicate some exasperation on the part of Jesus, who then said, "Bring the boy to me" (Mark 9:19). The account goes on:

So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.

Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?"

"From childhood," he answered. "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."

"If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes."

Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again."

The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

Mark 9:20-27

In public, the disciples probably applauded. "Hooray! Hallelujah! Praise Jesus! Another one bites the dust!" But in private-as it often is with us-their reaction was different. More honest. "After Jesus had

gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, 'Why couldn't we drive it out?'" (Mark 9:28). They were thinking: *What did we do wrong? Why couldn't we do that? What are we missing?*

Reality Bites

Maybe you can identify with those first followers of Jesus. They felt a disconnect between their expectations and their reality. Sound familiar?

So it is with our sense of something missing. We know that Jesus promised many wonderful things to His followers and, to be fair, we have expected and experienced some of those wonderful things. But, honestly, our expectations have sometimes been dashed.

Jesus promised, for example, "Anyone who believes in me will do the same works I have done, and even greater works" (John 14:12 NLT). But, like those disciples confronted with the demon-possessed boy, we are usually left wondering, *What am I doing wrong?*

We sense that we should be feeling more comfortable and confident in our relationship with God, rather than riddled with doubt and unsure about who we are and where-or even if-we belong in the Kingdom of God.

Some of us feel at times as though we have lost our compass. It seems as if we used to see everything more clearly than we do these days, from the moral lines in the world around us to the lines between right and wrong in our own hearts and lives.

We thought by now - those of us who have followed Jesus for more than a few weeks-that we would be better in so many ways. Our prayers should be more frequent ... and more often answered. Our Bible reading should be enriching and rewarding ... and more regular. Should we not be better at resisting sin? Holier, even?

And those "greater things" Jesus mentioned. Would you not think they include miracles? Healing? Not just physical, but in our relationships, in our families? Should we not feel more capable, peaceful, joyful, spiritual?

Are we just complainers? Malcontents? Or is there really *something missing*? And if so, what is it?

FOR REFLECTION

- In what ways has your expectation of the Christian life differed from your experience of living the Christian life?