

In Step with the Spirit

*Infusing Your Life
with God's Presence and Power*

Sarah Bowling



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Foreword

Sarah Bowling is my good friend. And what I value so much about her is how deeply she wants everyone to know and have an intimate connection with her closest friend, the Holy Spirit.

This book is powerful because it takes a deep look into the moments you can allow the Holy Spirit to walk with you, whether they are the most difficult times or the most glorious times. Sarah captures a total understanding of what it looks like to invite the Holy Spirit into every aspect of our lives.

She helps us experience the reality of the Helper that Jesus told His followers about, leading us into Jesus' introduction of the Holy Spirit as part of His last words and instructions before He experienced His crucifixion. Can you imagine the clock ticking and the pressure Jesus felt, knowing He had only that short time to reveal and release the Helper who would impact us for all time? He wanted to implant in them an expectancy for this great outpouring and friendship that was crucial to His whole mission. Sarah relates how that same expectancy needs to be in us as it was in them.

I appreciate how practical this book is. It leads us to expect the Holy Spirit to be with us in every area of life. Chapter 4, which teaches how to handle a closed door, demonstrates how we can look for God's providential movement and be at peace, knowing He has control of every situation we face. Chapter 5's emphasis on perseverance is so crucial, as we can so easily become stuck in difficult circumstances and relationships. Chapter 9 invites us to live that naturally supernatural lifestyle, and chapter 11, on defying the impossible, is a must read, for it is how we live.

In Step with the Spirit makes you desperate for more of the Holy Spirit. It helps you know the Holy Spirit is there for you. Open your heart as you explore with Sarah her experience of the past and present that can birth in you a hunger for the future the Holy Spirit has for you.

This book is not just a teaching. It is not just a history. It is an encounter! And it awaits you here in its pages. So, come on—let's delve into this adventure of staying in step with the Spirit, our heavenly help.

Robby Dawkins, author and international speaker

Acknowledgments

My heartfelt thanks go out to loads of people because I could never write a book without help.

Thanks to my friends Diane and Joe, who did lots of extra work to make this book reader friendly. Thanks to Jody for giving me a place and ample time to prayerfully write in a perfect and secluded setting. Thanks to our church and ministry team, who afforded me plenty of time to focus on this project.

Massive thanks to my husband and kids, who support my writing efforts every day, not just with my book writing but also with my daily writing discipline. You guys rock.

Most of all, thanks to the Holy Spirit for talking and walking with me on this journey. Onward and upward!



Tiptoe through the Trash

Should I drop the camera to help her, or should I keep shooting?

This is what my cameraman said was going through his mind when, right in front of his eyes in a dump in Cambodia, I was sinking into piles and piles of garbage. Sewage was seeping into my pants, and horror was written all over my face. For me, it seemed like time came to a complete stop as I tried to figure out my next literal step.

My mind flashed to the trash compactor scene in *Star Wars*, when Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, Princess Leia and Chewbacca got stuck in a murky dump and felt an underwater creature slither past their feet. I was in trash and sewage up to my thighs and hoping with everything inside me that no creature was down there, about to brush against my leg before I could figure out how to extract myself from the situation. My friends who were with me, including the camera guy (who had the camera running), were stunned by this development.

You might ask, “Why were you rummaging around at a trash dump in Cambodia?” We were on one of my mission trips there, and my friends and I were looking for neighborhoods that scraped out a living from scavenging the trash. I was mired in sewage because I had been walking ahead of everyone else and assumed the ground was solid. Before I knew what was happening, I took a step and plunged into a smelly concoction of waste. When I finally pulled myself out of the mess, I looked and smelled like everything else around me—well, except for my friends, who learned quickly from my misfortune and sidestepped the unpleasant experience for themselves.

Indeed, I became part of my surroundings in both appearance and odor. I smelled and looked so bad that later, when we went to visit Mother Teresa’s work in Phnom Penh, the

nun who greeted us at the door refused to let me in unless I first washed off the smell and muck!

We either blend into our communities and environs with the steps we choose for daily life, or we avoid the common odors and messes of daily life by staying in step with the Holy Spirit.

This event happened several years ago, and I learned many valuable lessons from the mishap. The first is that we either blend into our communities and environs with the steps we choose for daily life, or we avoid the common odors and messes of daily life by staying in step with the Holy Spirit. While I am learning that walking with the Holy Spirit does not guarantee I

will not walk through “garbage dumps” or challenging seasons, I do not have to let the sewage seep into my soul or sabotage

the steps of my life and the destination of my journey—and neither do you.

Additionally, staying in step with the Holy Spirit is a supernatural adventure that we cannot concoct with our natural thinking. As you read through this book, you will find lots of personal examples of this supernatural adventure from my life and the lives of people I know. You will read about my friend who raised a person from the dead, about the time my husband supernaturally recovered from a freak stroke and how the Holy Spirit directed my steps when my daughter entered kindergarten. (I will share that last story with you later in this chapter.)

But I will also share what it looks like when we do not walk in step with the Holy Spirit. I will tell you about the honest struggles I have faced over the years to walk with the Holy Spirit in this way. I share these kind of stories in addition to the successful ones because I believe that while we gain great encouragement from the testimonies of supernatural events, we often learn more from life's failures and shortfalls.

In fact, let's spend a few moments right now with that very question: What does it look like to be out of step with the Holy Spirit?

Out of Step

To begin, when we do not walk in step with the Holy Spirit, we may be thirsty and not realize it.

I see this happen when I snowboard in the mountains of Colorado, which I do quite often. It is common for someone from a low altitude to visit Colorado to ski and then complain about a pounding headache. The first thing the ski patrol does is give that person a massive quantity of water to drink. The

headache is the first indication that the person is dehydrated, but they are usually oblivious to their water deficiency.

The same principle rings true for followers of Jesus. Consider what Jesus said in John 7:37–39 about our not being thirsty:

Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, ‘From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.’” But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

In these verses, Jesus says His followers will have rivers of living water flow from their innermost being, by which He means the Holy Spirit. But in the modern church, there can be a deficiency of the Holy Spirit flowing through many followers of Jesus—and, indeed, many believers can themselves *be* a headache because they lack a vibrant relationship with the Holy Spirit. It seems much of modern Christianity skips over cultivating a vibrant and transformational relationship with the Holy Spirit, such that we can be altogether oblivious of the rich intimacy that anchors genuine love deep in our hearts and expresses the supernatural power of God.

Not walking in step with the Holy Spirit can also show up in our lives in other ways. One of those ways is the absence of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which are named by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 and include words of wisdom, words of knowledge, faith, healing, the effecting of miracles, prophecy, the distinguishing of spirits, tongues and the interpretation of tongues. The absence of these gifts is evident when God’s

supernatural power is not demonstrated in unexplainable ways in our lives.

I have never appreciated the importance of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and their vitality in my daily life more than I do now, raising three teenagers. There are innumerable occasions when I will have supernatural discernment about something they are involved in that could be harmful. Several times over the course of any given month, I will usually have a word of wisdom or word of knowledge for one of them. And it warms my heart to know they love to pray for healing for their friends, people at church, teachers and others. They see some incredible results from those prayers!

One example of how vital these gifts can be happened to me a few years ago. My husband and I were jolted out of a deep sleep around 1:30 a.m. to find our daughter having a grand mal seizure on her bathroom floor. She had been having seizure symptoms for several months but nothing as severe as a grand mal.

I will never forget sitting on that bathroom floor in the middle of the night, holding her in my lap and feeling entirely helpless. My husband and I began to pray in English and quickly ran out of words. Then he began to pray in the Spirit, and I immediately followed his lead.

After what seemed to be an eternity, the seizure subsided and we got her into bed. I slept the rest of the night on the floor by her side, hoping we could figure out the next steps in the morning. In those moments of helplessness and frantic anxiety, I cannot begin to express how helpful it was to pray in the Spirit and to sense the comfort and strength of the Holy Spirit sitting with me in those hours.

This experience was not only a rude awakening in the middle of the night, but also one that challenged me to let the gifts of the Holy Spirit flow through my daily life with

greater freedom. I would like to provoke you, my friend, to allow these gifts to flow more freely in your life, too.

So, there can be an absence of the supernatural gifts when we are not walking in step with the Holy Spirit, but we must pay premium attention to the fruits of the Holy Spirit, too. The fruits of the Holy Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, as Galatians 5:22–23 teaches. When we find ourselves getting impatient, being unkind, flying off the handle or being fretful or hopeless, we would be wise to look at the quantity and quality of our interactions with the Holy Spirit. The fruits of the Spirit show up in our lives as a consequence of our fellowship with the Holy Spirit.

Here is one way it can look when we get out of step with the Holy Spirit and lose the evidence of the Holy Spirit's fruit in our life. One time I came home from a taxing ministry trip and was extremely tired. Things only got worse because I landed back home at one of the busiest times of the year, when huge expectations were being made on my time and attention. The last straw came when I instructed my kids to take care of some housecleaning while my husband and I attended an obligatory event that lasted several hours. When we came home, they had not done what I had told them to do, and I hit the roof! Later, when I calmed down, the kids teased me that I had turned into Medusa Mama.

We all have seasons that make intense demands on our lives and press us beyond our natural strength or ability. When that happens, let's be attentive to keeping our fellowship with the Holy Spirit as a premium priority, in order to prevent our own versions of the Medusa Mama syndrome.

Thankfully, there are loads of occasions when I know the Holy Spirit is working these fruits in my daily life. I am

grateful for the times when I am given that extra dose of self-control to hold back a snarky comment or when I sense an extra boost of patience given to me, even though my body and brain are tired from all I am doing to keep up with my responsibilities. I especially love those times when I should be discouraged but sense a joy in my heart that defies logic. I appreciate all of the fruits of the Spirit because I am altogether convinced that the Holy Spirit helps me to be my best self—not the Medusa Mama!

Twice In Sync

Now let's consider a few practical ways we can stay in sync with the Holy Spirit. In the simplest application, I see two ways of doing this well: *direction* and *pace*.

Direction is the first marker that we are keeping in step with the Holy Spirit. I think about this concept of direction when I reflect on the supernatural experiences I had with the Holy Spirit the week before I was married. Prior to that week, I was firm in my plans to pursue a graduate degree in history and then employment as a university professor in that field. As a backup plan, I was somewhat open to international missions work, but I considered that a remote possibility. I was definitely *not* interested in devoting my life to teaching the Bible or serving in ministry.

Then came a startling change in direction. Well, it was more like my plans were derailed and the Holy Spirit set me on a different trajectory entirely. The week of my wedding, the Holy Spirit confronted me and shifted the direction my life would go.

I was in a church service and ended up on the floor, overpowered by the presence of God. The fullness of that experience

of God's presence altered me in a fundamental way. Whereas before I was determined to be a college professor and certainly not go into ministry, afterward I felt eager to join God's work in any way I could. I am active in the ministry to this day and writing this book for you now because of that massive shift of direction that happened in that pre-wedding week long ago, led by the Holy Spirit.

We have to reflect with vulnerable candor on our willingness to let the Holy Spirit direct our steps. It is easy to give religious approval to the idea of divine direction but still not let the Holy Spirit shape the actual steps we take and the direction we go in our daily life.

For example, even though I can tell you about the week of my wedding as a time when I let the Holy Spirit direct my steps, I can also give you loads of examples of when I did not allow the Holy Spirit to direct my steps. One such example happened more than ten years ago in one of my friendships.

*We have to reflect
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direct our steps.*

I was enjoying the friendship, but it had some bad ingredients that were unhealthy. There was a lot of dependency between us, and we relied too much on the emotional support we gave each other. Rather than accentuating Jesus, the friendship revolved around staying attached to each other.

There were multiple times I sensed the Holy Spirit endeavoring to direct me away from this friendship, but I resisted this direction and held fast to my own preferences. There were a few occasions I did missions work overseas and knew the Holy Spirit had directed my steps there not only so I could

minister to the people there, but also so I could give that friendship some space. I resisted the natural pause those trips provided, though, and stayed in communication with my friend throughout the duration of them.

To make a long story short, the friendship unraveled and ultimately became a painful experience for me. It left behind some trash in my soul that the Holy Spirit had to clean out for many years. Learning to follow the Holy Spirit's direction has since become vital for keeping my soul clear of emotional clutter, destructive consequences and wasteful detours.

Pace is another way of marking our in-sync steps with the Holy Spirit. Sometimes we can go faster than the Holy Spirit is leading or lag behind the Holy Spirit, not going fast enough to keep up. Personally, I struggle more often with going faster than the Holy Spirit's leading.

One of those times was when my daughter was first starting kindergarten—a momentous turning point for any parent. Since I was keen on ensuring an excellent education for my kids, I had put her name on a waiting list at a nearby charter school almost three years before she was to start school. I was both prayerful and hopeful that after a few years, her name would be high enough on the list for her to get accepted.

When August rolled around, she was still eight spots from getting accepted, and I was disappointed. On the first day of school, she attended the neighborhood public school instead. I tried to keep an optimistic outlook and endeavored to volunteer at the neighborhood school as a helpful parent. But the more days that passed with her attending that school, the more unsettled I felt in my heart about her education there.

Rather than follow the Holy Spirit's pace, I jumped ahead and began working at a feverish pitch to get her into another school. But, alas, all the schools I tried were filled and could

not immediately accept her transfer. I talked with my husband about my concern, and we got into a heated argument.

I became frustrated with all of these roadblocks.

Eventually, I brought this stressful ordeal to the Holy Spirit and asked what to do about my daughter's education. I felt the Spirit challenge me to trust Him and not send myself into a frenzied spiral of stress. With exasperation, I threw up my hands in surrender and agreed with the Holy Spirit that He knew what was best.

Less than a week later, the original charter school to which we had applied three years earlier called and said they had an unexpected opening. They asked if I would still be interested in enrolling my daughter, even though school had already been going for a few weeks. I readily agreed and transferred her there, and the school has been a huge blessing to each of my kids and their educational development.

In short, my attempts to run ahead of the Holy Spirit left me frustrated and frazzled. When I relinquished control to the Holy Spirit, everything lined up in divine order for a supernatural outcome.

While this story gives a good example of what can happen when we try to speed up the pace of the Holy Spirit, consider the other side of the coin: when we lag behind the pace at which the Spirit is leading. I have a friend who struggles with this. She tends to drag her feet when it comes to keeping up with the Holy Spirit's leading. This wonderful friend is always patient and gracious, but she will readily tell you she struggles to keep in sync with the Holy Spirit's cadence because of her desire to understand everything and to be in control. Thankfully, she grew up in a home that recognized the importance of the Holy Spirit, so she is aware of her struggle and keeps herself surrounded by people and communities

that prioritize the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

These two indicators—direction and pace—can work wonders for keeping us on track with the Holy Spirit’s guidance in our lives.

Moving Forward

In the next chapter, we will take a look at who the Holy Spirit is, based on Jesus’ teachings in John 14–16, as it is critical that we gain a fundamental understanding of the Holy Spirit if we are going to walk in His presence and power.

Then we will move into a section of the book that explores the Holy Spirit as our compass. You will learn how the Holy Spirit can direct you, how to navigate closed doors and how to discern and be persistent in the ways you are being led.

Next, we will look at the ways the Holy Spirit can help us with our relationships. This important section will look at the Holy Spirit’s impact on our families, how the Holy Spirit can help us in difficult relationships and what to do when we feel out of step with the people around us.

Finally, the last section of the book will help you with the critical life tasks of avoiding deadly land mines, doing the impossible and walking with the Spirit throughout your daily life.

At the end of each chapter, I include a prayer that I encourage you to pray aloud and agree with in your heart. This prayer can be a starting point for more dialogue with the Holy Spirit about the contents of the chapter and how its teaching can apply to your life. Additionally, each chapter includes reflection questions that can be useful for individual meditation or group discussion. They can also be used as journaling prompts,

helping you think further about the personal application of the ideas to your life.

Let's have some fun together with the Holy Spirit!

Prayer

Holy Spirit, thank You for leading me to read this book. Please help me to listen to You as I read, and help me to hear You talking with me about how I can stay in step with You better. I want Your presence and power to infuse my life so that I reflect Jesus to the people around me and so that I walk in greater intimacy with You every day.

Go Further

1. Why were you drawn to read this book?
2. How are you keeping in step with the Holy Spirit in your life right now? How are you noticing yourself out of step with Him?
3. In the past, when you have been in sync with the Holy Spirit, what was the result? What has happened when you got out of sync?
4. In what areas of your life would you like more direction from the Holy Spirit right now?
5. Do you tend to jump ahead or lag behind the Holy Spirit's pace? Why do you think that is?