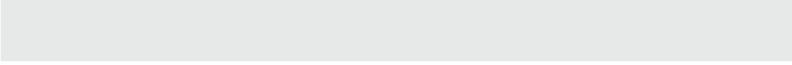


Foreword



It was the start of a new school year, in a new city, with new people. We had moved our family from the security of a hometown that felt comfortable and familiar, and we were starting all over. Insecurity, fear of the unknown, and apprehension nipped at our heels as we prepared to make this new place home. The night before school began, we took our kids down to the beach and watched them play. Encountering the waves, the beauty of creation, and the irresistible pull of the water unleashed them to just enjoy the moment. Joy. Peace. Laughter. Everyone soaked up the happiness and freedom and momentarily forgot their worries. If only we could have bottled up what was felt that evening and sprinkled it over everyone as they headed out the door to face their daily challenges. But the daily grind greets us, and without realizing it we start living for the next blissful break instead of appreciating the sacredness of every moment.

How many of us are living for the next vacation? Or just waiting for the next season of life? Or have convinced ourselves that we can't experience freedom and joy until some circumstance changes? I believe most of us feel stuck in these places. In my years of leading *Walking with Purpose*, I have spoken with woman after woman who longs for something bound up in her heart to be unleashed and freed. Sometimes it's a hidden passion and purpose. Other times it's a habitual sin that she can't break free from. Or it's just a general restlessness—a sense that there is more—but that something more seems illusive.

What if the key to experiencing freedom and joy wasn't found in idyllic circumstances but, instead, in a steady connection to the Holy Spirit? What if there was something that God wants to unleash in our lives that could transform us from within?

In *Unleashed*, Sonja Corbitt helps women receive everything the Holy Spirit is longing to pour over us. Her love of scripture and ability to present it in a way that is immensely practical helps us to look at the places in our lives that are bound up and in need of release. She comes alongside us as a friend and as a woman who is still on the journey. Her wisdom comes from experience, but it is never presented in a spirit of "just get your act together and learn from me." She has been there. She is real. In these pages, we find a kindred spirit who offers a hand to help us up. She understands how hard life can be. Yet she goes beyond saying, "I know what the struggle feels like." By God's grace, Sonja has experienced victory and moved past some of the pitfalls a lot of us are still in. Her words give us tools to move forward and experience the life we were created for.

When we struggle with discontentment over our circumstances, we are all tempted to numb that discomfort in all sorts of ways. Sonja challenges us, instead, to do the deep soul work that will ultimately lead to freedom and satisfaction.

She begins by inviting us to unleash the Holy Spirit to reframe our stories. Not a single heartache in our lives has been wasted. God has seen every tear and wants to use everything we have experienced in order to achieve his purposes in our lives and world. There's no need to wallow in regret. Once we are forgiven, we are free for God to redeem every mistake. A part of the process of unleashing will require forgiveness of others. Our stories haven't occurred in isolation. People have hurt us, and many of us are bound by resentment and bitterness. Sonja challenges us to surrender judgment and receive peace in exchange.

We can all point to experiences in our lives when we have been confused by what God was doing and allowing. Perhaps we've wondered if he was asleep on the job. In dark moments, we may question whether or not he even cares. This is sacred ground. This is where our deepest hurts reside, and the question why makes healing and moving forward seem impossible. Sonja guides us to look at our circumstances and helps us probe them for lessons that lead us toward the process of purification, to hear God more clearly, and to grow in maturity.

Another place so many of us are stuck is in the area of passion and purpose. We might wonder why we are here. We wonder if we really matter. We feel desires within and wonder if following God means squelching them. If we're supposed to be other-focused, should we just set our own hopes aside? Never has there been a time when women have had more advantages, yet our level of discontentment is sky-high. We wonder what we are missing. These are good things to wrestle with, because make no mistake: we were made for more. God has big plans for each one of us, and our desires are a big part of that.

God wants us to ask the scary questions. He wants to travel with us to our places of discontentment and the places where we dream. Calling us away from the sleep of complacency, God asks us to take his hand and step out into the deep. The alternative is to scurry back to a place of familiarity. In Sonja's words, "ultimately, comfort seeking is a denial of the need to change." When we refuse to change, we miss out on becoming the women God created us to be. We miss out, and the world misses out. God created each of his precious daughters and gave us a mission when we were still in the womb. Those things that cause us to jump off the couch in righteous indignation? Those needs that we see around us? God is waiting for us to wake up and recognize that the things that wreck our hearts wreck his as well. He asks us to take the time to come to a place of

spiritual wholeness so we can get on to the business of being his hands and feet to our desperate, aching world.

The truths contained in *Unleashed*, if taken to heart and applied, can release our souls to receive God in his fullness. New patterns of behavior and thought can be created. Freedom will no longer be a fanciful dream, but a daily experience. You do not have to finish the way that you started.

So read this precious book with an open heart. Ask the Holy Spirit to prepare you to receive his truth. Ask him to cover your hurts with a protective balm so that you can work through the layers of your heart, bit by bit. Be assured, the lover of your soul is gentle. He is for you. He is Goodness Itself. Don't be afraid of the journey. He is there with you, each step of the way.

Lisa Brenninkmeyer

Founder of Walking with Purpose

Author of *Walking with Purpose: Seven Priorities That
Make Life Work*

Introduction

Most of the time, doesn't discussion or exploration of the Holy Spirit involve lots of intimidation with reticence on top, if it occurs at all? Is it because we are afraid to be "haunted" by the *Holy Ghost*? Or perhaps it's because we know our dried-up lives are nothing if they aren't perfect kindling for a burning bush and we probably shouldn't get too close.

I remember pouting to God once about having to be my husband's "helper." You know, in Genesis 2:18 where God says, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him," and then he makes Eve for Adam? I thought, *Why does he get to do all the doing that gets done, and I just get to "help"?* Silly and immature, I know.

But God said to me, "I am The Helper." And he is.

In St. John's gospel Jesus says, "I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth" (Jn 14:16-17). Other versions translate *Counselor* as Advocate, Helper, Paraclete, or Comforter. It's a battle word that conveys the idea of coming alongside, to surround, advise, guard, protect, and aid.

Because it is part of our feminine genius, women do this for others as a reflection of the Holy Spirit who humbly does it for us all. In fact it's only *because* of him that I can *help* anyone. I imitate him, the Great Helper, and as I do I am drawn into a deep, fertile relationship with the Holy Spirit that has the stamp of his character. This idea is very Marian, for Mary has an utterly unique, fertile, and practical relationship with the Holy Spirit.

Every time I present the “Unleashed” talk at conferences and retreats, I am almost mobbed afterward by people on a similar journey, with comparable agonies, terrible habits, toxic relationships, and repetitive circumstances that bind and burden us all. I wrote this book to offer how the Holy Spirit came alongside and unleashed me through the scriptures, to help you get in touch with him through the surprisingly practical ways he comes alongside and teaches me.

This book may be more meditation than scripture study, *per se*. I probably take a different approach than some authors you’ve read or scripture studies you’ve done. There’s room for us all at the table of the Word, right? Because it’s full of scripture *and* study, it’s a feast for groups and individuals. But I hope you find studying the scriptures with me less intimidating than spinach and maybe even as tasty as a cupcake.

Ever practical and real like Mary, we’re going to hear God speak, ponder his word in our hearts, and act decisively on what he says. The foundation of each chapter is a question that Jesus asked in the scriptures, questions Jesus asks each of us personally. Expect each chapter (except the first) to also include:

- A Review—“Repetition is the mother of learning,” as they say, so we spend some time revisiting each chapter in a concise way.
- An Invitation—This section applies the scriptures and the chapter to our own lives.
- A God Prompt—Here I offer specific ways to get personally and directly in touch with God.

I invite you now to consider marking your book as you read and to make notes in a journal of some sort as you go. You might be surprised at what bubbles up to the surface as you read and meditate. I also suggest reading *Unleashed* with a Bible on hand, perhaps the *Catechism*, too, especially if you’re reading and studying as a group. That will be helpful,

but it's not necessary. The Invitation and God Prompt sections might be too personal for group sharing, so there are group study questions and a supplemental leader's guide located in the back of the book just for you and your group.

That's about it. So, come sit here beside me, and let's chat. And have a cupcake.

What Do You Wish?

Matthew 20:21, NAB

Come On In, Lord.
Unleash Your Spirit!

The day it clicked was like a tiny mental gear I hadn't known existed sliding gently into place. Both a new Catholic and new homeschooling parent, I was still in my pajamas, eating raspberries and cheddar for breakfast while facilitating a history lesson for my third-grade son. He was working on a timeline review that included the Creation event; dinosaurs and evolution; the Sumerian civilization and its cuneiform writing; Egyptian civilization, pharaohs, and the pyramids; and Moses's Exodus.

Suddenly, seeing all of these events side by side on the same timeline made me realize that secular and biblical history are the same history, and my own human past. No

longer two separate collections of stories that happened thousands of years ago, all those Bible “stories” I had grown up with in church and the “stories” of early civilizations from public school suddenly became one history, and *real* in a way they hadn’t seemed before. The people came alive when I imagined them all living together on our common arc of time, which included me and my own family.

Even though scriptural genres can be highly literary and poetic, our sacred history is true. What if I began to read scripture with the thought that they are my people, that they are me? What if I read it remembering I will be those people for future generations, whether for good or ill?

In this chapter we consider a question Jesus asked the mother of two of his disciples: “What do you wish?” (Mt 20:21). An eyewitness account of a real person’s conversation with Jesus, here St. Matthew conveys the mother’s considerable ambition for her sons. She asked Jesus for places of power and authority in the kingdom of God for them.

If the Holy Spirit gave *you* such a wish, what would it be? Twenty pounds gone overnight? A miraculous conversion or healing of a loved one? Relief from an addiction? Greater financial security? A restored relationship?

For most of us, our wishes could probably be distilled to a single seven-letter word: freedom—freedom from sickness, death, worry. We want to be freed from the regrets, habits, and painful encounters in our lives that rob us of peace and joy. Like the mother in this gospel, isn’t my single greatest wish for myself and my children simply to be fulfilled? Don’t I also go to great lengths to make it possible for them?

In this chapter and those following, we’ll listen in on some conversations that Jesus had with real people like you and me. Among the many things Jesus did, he asked a lot of probing questions. Because the scriptures are real and true for us in our time, too, we’ll place ourselves in the narrative. As we hear him ask us those same questions, we’re going

to answer them, because a question from Jesus is always an invitation to *unleash* and to *be unleashed*.

Along the way, I hope we'll also discover the secret to true fulfillment: turning the Holy Spirit loose in our hearts and giving him permission to identify and eradicate the causes of our worry, unhappiness, discontent, and regret. It all begins with a simple act of hospitality. By answering Jesus' questions, we invite God in to throw open the doors and windows of our hearts and lives, and to unleash his Word to shine a strong, clear light that dispels the darkness.

Creating a Happy Home for God

Few things say "home" to me like the smell of early spring floating through a screen door and open windows—windows that look out over acres of clover and ambling flocks. Such a breeze makes lacey curtains blow greenness into rooms and the scent of daffodils into sheets billowing on the line—sheets that will soon cradle exhausted bodies flopping in feather beds with fluffy comforters. Can you see yourself in a home like this?

Hospitality is often understood as a way of entertaining. In fact, hospitality is a whole industry—think Martha Stewart, Ina Garten, Giada De Laurentiis, and Williams-Sonoma. Because I completely lack the hospitality gene, the exhortation, "Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels" (Heb 13:2, NAB) used to fill me with trepidation. It always brought to mind welcoming that one special guest at Thanksgiving or Christmas—you know, the one you couldn't wait to bid good-bye? Don't we all have those kinds of people in our lives? Bless their hearts.

No, southern hospitality doesn't always come naturally to me. I'm a Secular Carmelite in formation; I have a hermetical streak a canyon wide. There was a time when I could

barely tolerate the thought of entertaining certain relatives, much less strangers. I adore people with gifts of hospitality for their warmth, generosity, sensitivity, and openness. But to me, hospitality was simply a lot of work tending toward a brewing conflict.

And yet, whether you have a hermetical inclination or a love for entertaining, hospitality has spiritual as well as social associations. In Jewish thought, hospitality was modeled by God, who created the cosmos and world to welcome the human race, the “other.” Think about the Holy Family, in which hospitality was a simple, constantly repeated “yes” that welcomed each “other.”

As Christians we are invited to consider hospitality as using what’s been given to welcome Christ. Through the Nativity and Holy Family we learn that hospitality means to prepare a space for Christ—in the home, sure, but primarily in the heart. We will see this repeatedly in the following chapters: Jesus is always ready to receive the other and wants to be received. He asks the question and anticipates the answer. I confess I find this understanding of hospitality much easier and far less stressful to apply.

It’s fun to have tea parties, beautiful linens, bone china, modern furniture, and a perfect home when you welcome others. But I began to find that those things sometimes became an obstacle to accepting and reaching others in need. We can’t invite so-and-so because they aren’t the right people, or we don’t have the right dishes or the perfect house, the amount of time, the personality, and so on.

The Benedictine charism is especially good at expressing the scriptural understanding of hospitality, in which all things are not mine, only on loan—even spiritual “things.” St. Benedict tells us to enjoy our things, but release and return them. We don’t possess them.

He speaks about the interior disposition of the heart. He emphasizes attitude, an attitude of detachment—or better, nonattachment. Benedict is clear that outward

hospitality and conformity don't count. There must be integrity between the exterior and the interior—and this unity is primary. I have to let my things go free. They don't own me; I am not in bondage to them. And I do not own them. I handle them with care, respect, and with all courtesy of love and offer them back to Christ from whom I first received them.

Biblical hospitality is simply sharing all that has been given to me with those I have been given. As I do so, I welcome Christ and unleash his spirit: "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40). For the Holy Family, this primarily meant the domestic church, their home. For us, throughout our time together, I'd like you to think of your heart and life as the primary places to share what you have, no matter the condition, with Jesus. Such simplicity of heart is an invitation and incubator for Christ to grow in "wisdom and stature" in the little Nazareth home of the spirit (Lk 2:52).

As I began to learn the meaning of hospitality through the simplicity of the Holy Family, a particular man came clearly and repeatedly to mind. An older solitary man, he always sat in the pew with us at Mass, and he worked at our supermarket as a courtesy clerk. I saw him every Friday at the grocery store and beside me every Sunday in the church pew, but I had never really talked to him. I felt called to invite him to Sunday dinner. We learned he does not drive and walks to Mass each week, so we took him home with us, twenty-five miles out of town, for our Sunday-dinner-and-afternoon-porch routine. We discovered Lex lives with and cares for his mother, is a war veteran, had a passionate love relationship that never worked out and left him unmarried, takes a taxi to work every day, and is a wealth of genealogical information on our county and region. He is a fascinating man who was visibly delighted by being with our family, but I would never have known the surprise and pleasure of him as a person if I had not attempted to apply the hospitality lesson.

I give what I have and find myself enriched and even surprised. For me, that is a refreshing understanding of hospitality because it cares nothing for what the condition of the house, dishes, linens, or children are like at all. While Christ doesn't need our hospitality, he waits to be surprised because it is a gift. I love the idea I might be able to surprise God (however loosely I have to apply the principle to his omniscience).

Godly "Remodeling"

My husband and I have been living in and remodeling a romantic old farmhouse for almost the entire twenty years of our marriage. When we first moved in, I had great expectations for how quickly and smoothly the work would go. Every room needed to be gutted and rebuilt from the foundation up. In the beginning I struggled against how long the process would remain unfinished (forever!).

Now I clearly see God has used my house to teach me important, surprising lessons on the differences between needs and wants, simplicity, patience, and the wonder of beautiful things that are imperfect but still useful and interesting. I purposely kept a couple of our ancient interior walls with their gorgeous, peeling wallpaper simply for their disheveled beauty. I regularly repurpose antiques and other items that are too damaged for their original functions in ways that are surprising and even funny: I use an old iron headboard as a garden gate, a flowerpot to corral kitchen utensils, and a marble bust as a handy perch for hats and caps.

Once I began to see our house as a metaphor for my life with God, living and resting in his provision, then offering others hospitality in an unfinished house became much easier and more enjoyable. My heart was unleashed unto true hospitality.

When I apply scriptural hospitality, I discover that I must simply give God all I have—in heart, home, habits, relationships, circumstances, desires, and prayer—and open wide myself to the surprise and freedom that happens when the Holy Spirit is unleashed through it all.

At first, my own destructive patterns prevented a total welcoming and full-hearted yes to the Lord in a lot of areas. Because it all desperately lacked spiritual propriety, I was unable, unwilling, and afraid to give what I had to the Holy Spirit. I didn't know, then, that opening my spiritual home and all its unkempt, disheveled rooms to him is the only way they can be freshened and freed. Since then, giving whatever I have and unleashing him—that exquisite, terrifying Divine—to move and work in my life has been a constant surprise and thrill.

It's a lot like fishing, isn't it? Or really, more like being caught? That seizing moment, the sudden sense of "startlement," and then the fierce awareness as the mental line springs taut, and the heart and mind are caught in fascination by some new consideration. For me it began with a tender conversation with my aunt about her relationship with God. I distinctly remember my near revulsion when she said she always imagined crawling up into the Father's lap when she prayed.

Not that I didn't long to be in my own father's lap, but my relationship with him involved a terrified respect, assurance of punishment, and extreme wariness confused up in the longing. I was unable to grasp wallowing happily around in Almighty God's lap or being there at all unless he was compelling me to. I was fascinated, but suspicious, in bondage to my beliefs about what God was like. Would I smell his heavenly Chaps cologne? Would he tickle me till it hurt? Would I then cry and wish I hadn't risked it? Would I say something that angered him and made him push me out?