

The Spirit of God

Do you feel desperate for the power of the Holy Spirit today? If not, you may have a misunderstanding of who you are or who the Holy Spirit is. Every aspect of our salvation is dependent on Him. Without the Spirit, we can't know God, understand Scripture, overcome sin, or transform the people around us. We are spiritually impotent without the Spirit, so it is vital that we have a right understanding of who He is and what He does. Our need for God's Spirit goes all the way back to the beginning. Adam and Eve rebelled against God in the garden, and humanity has been rebelling ever since. The history of Israel is a powerful reminder that human beings cannot faithfully follow God without the Spirit. God pinpointed Israel's problem in Ezekiel 36: they had a heart of stone. They were spiritually dead. They needed a new heart and a new spirit. And God's solution to this problem involved nothing less than the complete transformation of His people: I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. (Ezek. 36:25–27) What God's people needed was the Spirit of God. They needed to be changed from the inside out and empowered by the very presence of God. This may have sounded far-fetched to the Israelites. After all, they stood terrified at the base of Mount Sinai when God spoke with Moses on the mountaintop. They fell on their faces as God's glory filled the temple. They had to be so cautious with God's presence dwelling in the tabernacle and temple. How could this all-powerful God possibly dwell within stained and fragile human beings? Yet this miracle is the exact reality that we find in the New Testament. It is the solution to humanity's rebellion, the culmination of God's plan of redemption. When Jesus told the disciples of the Spirit's coming, He was not implying that the Spirit had not yet come into existence, or that the Spirit was previously inactive in the world. The Spirit was active in creation and in God's redemptive work in the Old Testament. However, the Old Testament pointed ahead to a time when God's Spirit would work in humanity in a new and powerful way.

Q1 Take a minute to consider the significance of the promise of the Holy Spirit in Ezekiel 36:25–27. Explain why this promise is so important in the history of redemption.

Who Is the Holy Spirit?

We must be careful when we discuss a topic as sacred as the Holy Spirit. The most important thing is to recognize that the Holy Spirit is God. Just as Jesus Christ is a distinct person but is also fully divine, so too the Holy Spirit is both unique and fully God.¹ This is the mystery that we refer to as the Trinity, and it is based in the reality that the Bible talks about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as distinct persons, but also clearly identifies each of these persons as God. This carries important implications for how we think about the Holy Spirit. He is more than a mystical guru or a genie—He is God and worthy of the love and obedience that God deserves. This also tells us that the Holy Spirit is a person. He is not an impersonal force, so we should not refer to the Spirit as an “it.” The Holy Spirit is a “He,” a person with the ability to act, will, and even be grieved (Eph. 4:30). These brief thoughts should frame the way we think about the Spirit of God.

Q2 How should seeing the Holy Spirit as a person and as God Himself change the way you relate to Him?

The Spirit in the New Testament

The Holy Spirit’s actions fill the pages of the New Testament. From the very start we see that John the Baptist and Jesus were filled with the Holy Spirit as they grew and fulfilled their ministries (Luke 1:15 and 4:1). The Gospels are full of reminders that Jesus’s ministry was empowered by the Spirit of God. The incredible events that unfold in the New Testament are the direct result of the Holy Spirit’s working. In Acts 2, the Spirit came in dramatic fashion to the disciples and empowered them in an unprecedented way. This came at a crucial moment. Jesus returned from the dead, gave them an impossible task in the Great Commission, and then ascended back to heaven. The disciples had been commissioned, but Jesus told them to wait until they received power from above. Suddenly, the Spirit came upon the disciples, and they began “telling the mighty works of God” in multiple languages. Peter pointed out that this outpouring of the Spirit had been

promised in the Old Testament. God's people had been waiting for the Spirit to empower them, and that long-awaited day had arrived. The Spirit of God was now working in humanity—not only on the leaders of Israel but on all of God's people.

Q3 Read Acts 2 carefully. As you read, pay attention to two things: (1) references to Old Testament truths and promises and (2) references to the Holy Spirit. What references do you see in Peter's sermon to some of the key concepts you studied in the Old Testament sessions?

Q4 What does this passage say about the Holy Spirit? How was the Holy Spirit working at this significant moment in redemption history?

The Spirit of God and the Word of God

Not only is the Holy Spirit responsible for the miraculous events recorded in the New Testament, He is also responsible for the writing of the Bible itself! Jesus told His disciples that the Spirit would remind them of what He had been teaching them (John 14:26). These are the things that the disciples and their close associates recorded in the New Testament. Similarly, 2 Peter 1:21 tells us that Scripture is not a human invention, but rather the result of the Spirit's working through the authors of the Bible. Every detail of the text of Scripture, even down to the seemingly mundane grammatical features,² is inspired by God and is therefore authoritative. While it is true that God used the personalities and other characteristics of the human authors in recording Scripture, even these human words are referred to as the Spirit's speaking (Heb. 3:7).

The Ministry of the Spirit

When Jesus was ministering on earth, there was no doubt that He was working toward the fulfillment of God's plan of redemption. We might have expected Jesus to continue ministering, gathering more and more followers, and finally completing the redemption that the world was longing for. But just when it seemed that redemption was a possibility, Jesus left. Was God's plan being cut short? Of course not. Jesus left when He did because that was part of God's plan. Jesus must have stunned the disciples when He said that it would be better for Him to leave than to stay! How could that be?

How could God's mission on earth possibly proceed more effectively without Jesus? The answer is found in the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you" (John 16:7).

Jesus sent us His Spirit ("the Helper") so that we can fulfill God's purposes on earth. The Spirit dwells inside His people—just as God dwelt in the tabernacle and temple in the Old Testament—so that He can work through us. This indwelling of the Spirit is not a special gift for some Christians, but rather it is God's gift to all of His people. Paul said very simply, "Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him" (Rom. 8:9). The Spirit is absolutely essential for fulfilling the mission we have been given. Unless the Spirit gives us the power to faithfully follow Jesus, we will follow in the footsteps of disobedient Israel. So great is our need for the Spirit that we are commanded to walk by the Spirit (Gal. 5:16), be filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18), pray in the Spirit (Jude v. 20), and put sin to death by the Spirit (Rom. 8:13), among other things. The Spirit secures our faithfulness till the end. Even the assurance that we are God's children comes from the testimony of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:16). In Romans 7 and 8, Paul contrasted the life that is lived in the flesh (that is, apart from the Spirit of God) with the life that is lived in the Spirit. The difference is staggering.

Q5 Read Romans 7 and 8. What does Paul's comparison of these two ways of living say about the role of the Holy Spirit and our need for Him?

The Spirit in God's Mission

God's plan of redemption marches on, and He is using His Spirit in the lives of His people to do this work. The church's mission is too difficult to accomplish without relying on the Spirit. Our mission is too important to attempt without His power. We simply cannot fulfill the Great Commission without seeking and depending on the Holy Spirit. But we do need to be careful that our pursuit of the Spirit leads us toward Jesus, not away from Him. John told us that the aim of the Holy Spirit is to glorify Jesus Christ (John 16:14). Like a spotlight, the Spirit focuses the attention on Christ and His salvation. Therefore, we should not separate the work of the Spirit from the work of Jesus (or God the Father, for that matter). If we are not led to

love and trust Jesus Christ more, it's likely that we are out of step with the Spirit. The Spirit can do unbelievable things in and through us. The miracles recorded in the New Testament often inspire us to pursue similar experiences today. But keep in mind that it is the Spirit we are pursuing, not a specific supernatural experience. As you seek to live by the power of the Spirit, look to the promises of God's Word. Trust the Spirit to show His power however He wants. More often than not, the Holy Spirit guides us by shaping who we are. He gives us new desires so that we gradually begin to live with the goal of glorifying God in all of our decisions. Though this doesn't look as dramatic as healing the sick or foretelling the future, it is every bit as miraculous.

Q6 How have you seen the Spirit of God working in the life of your church? If you are having trouble identifying the work of the Spirit, why do you think the Spirit's work isn't being clearly seen in your church?

The Spirit of God in the Church

In order to experience everything the Spirit offers, you need to be in close fellowship with other Christians. God designed us to function in a community of believers, each with our own spiritual gifts. To neglect your local church is to cut yourself off from one of the Spirit's most powerful ministries. All believers need the spiritual gifts of other believers. We need their teaching, leadership, encouragement, mercy, and even their loving confrontation, to name only a few gifts. On the other hand, consider how the Spirit has gifted you. How are you supposed to minister to your Christian brothers and sisters? The Spirit works not simply through individuals, but through the church as a whole. Everyday church life—manifest in things like encouragement, prayer, and communion—may sound very “ordinary,” but there's nothing ordinary about God's people. They are a Spirit-filled community; they are God's holy temple. We have already seen that the Spirit dwells within each Christian, just as He dwelled within the Old Testament temple. As important as that truth is, Paul also told us that the church is built together into a temple for the Holy Spirit (Eph. 2:19–22). That is, the Spirit does not simply dwell within each one of us, He also dwells in

our collective midst. The church is so central to God's mission on earth that He dwells among us to empower us for the work He has called us to.

Q7 How are you partnering with other members of the body of Christ to be used by the Spirit in fulfilling God's mission on earth?

Q8 Spend some time in prayer. Thank God for the incredible gift of the Holy Spirit. Pray that you would be empowered to pursue and rely on the Spirit's power in your life. Pray that God would work through the life of your church to bring healing, hope, and change to the world around you.

1 One of the most direct statements in Scripture that equates the Holy Spirit with God Himself is found in Acts 5. In verse 3, Peter asked Ananias why he chose to lie to the Holy Spirit, then in verse 4 Peter told Ananias that he had lied to God. The same assumption is made throughout the Bible: the Holy Spirit is fully God, just as Jesus Christ and the Father are fully God.

2 For an example of this, see Galatians 3:16, where Paul made an important theological argument based on the Old Testament's usage of a plural noun rather than a singular.