



## THE HOLY SPIRIT PART I: HUH?

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We are starting a new study this morning, looking more closely at the Holy Spirit. We talk a lot in church about God the Father and God the Son, but not a whole lot about God the Holy Spirit.

What comes to mind when you hear those words? People have several different concepts of what the Holy Spirit is all about. Some people see nothing but fog. Maybe you feel like the Spirit is a mysterious, hard-to-understand concept. Everything seems a little hazy.

Some people see the Holy Spirit as a power plant. We tap into the resources we need, sort of like this big electric current. The Holy Spirit is like some cosmic energy or life force that we can channel to our own purposes.

Or maybe you think of general weirdness. Maybe you've been to churches that call themselves "Spirit-filled" or you've seen services on TV where odd things have happened – people falling down, talking in strange gibberish. So maybe when you hear me mention the Holy Spirit you're ready to bolt for the door.

There's a lot of confusion out there about the nature of the Holy Spirit, which is why I thought it would be good to spend some time on the subject, and why I called Part I "Huh?" Today we're looking at defining and understanding the Holy Spirit. Later this month we'll look at the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives, what the different fruits of the Spirit are and what the gifts of the Spirit are all about.

We're not the first people to feel fuzzy on the details of the Holy Spirit. Listen to this story:

### **Acts 19:1-2**

*While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"*

*They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."*

Here was a group who considered themselves to be people of faith who had no clue about the Holy Spirit. They were lacking in their understanding, so Paul filled them in. More importantly, when he left them, they not only knew about the Holy Spirit – they had him in their lives and were experiencing the difference that made.

My prayer for this study wouldn't be that we would get some good "book learnin" about the Holy Spirit, but that we would walk away knowing his presence, knowing we can have him with us and being transformed by it.

So where should we start? We'll be looking at passages from all over the Bible, but I'd like to begin with one short sentence out of the First John:

### **1 John 4:16**

*God is love.*

God is love. That might seem like a very odd verse for talking about the Holy Spirit. As Tina Turner would say, what's love got to do with it? I think it will become clear as we go, so bear with me.

When John says that God is love, he's saying more than God is lovING. It isn't just that God shows love to us in what he does – his very essence is love. That is who he is. We also know that God is complete in himself. He doesn't need us or anything in creation to sustain his own existence.

### **Acts 17:25**

*And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.*

He's the source of everything. He could get along perfectly fine without the world that he made. That brings up an interesting question: If we're saying that God is love, how could that have been true before he had made anybody to love? Before he created anything, was God still love?

The answer is in this truth:

**God has a community within himself.** We call it the Trinity. The Christian belief states that God is three in one. We have God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. But they are not three separate Gods – they are one. It's a very deep mystery, but one that shows up in various ways throughout the Bible.

These three persons of the Trinity share love amongst themselves eternally. There are relationships within the Godhead and they're characterized by perfect love for each other. The Father loves the Son, and the Son loves the Father, and the Spirit is the dynamic between them. One theologian describes it this way.

*“This relationship between the Father and the Son comes forth as the third trinitarian member, the Holy Spirit. Because he is the Spirit of the Father and the Son, the Spirit is the essence of the triune God.”*

We’re getting very theoretical here, so let’s put it in terms of something a little more concrete. Let’s say I have a pot of boiling water, and I drop in an ice cube. The ice and water would produce steam on contact. All three are the same substance, and the steam represents the interaction between the ice and the water. It’s a rough illustration, but that’s a little bit like God. You have the Father and Son interacting, loving each other, and the bond between them is the Holy Spirit.

God gave us a physical representation of that in the book of Matthew, when Jesus was baptized.

**Matthew 3:16-17**

*As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son , whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”*

All three members of the Trinity are represented in that passage, all centered around God the Father saying how much he loved Jesus. God is love within himself, which means God is social within himself. There are relationships within God.

But there is still only one God. We don’t worship multiple gods.

**Deut 6:4**

*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.*

There is unity that can’t be divided. The three are somehow one. I don’t understand how that can be any more than I can understand what happened at Calvary where Father and Son were voluntarily torn apart. But I will say this: I’m grateful for the Trinity. I’m grateful for a God who transcends my comprehension – a God who is bigger than I could make up or imagine. The very fact that I can’t fully grasp something that I know is true about God helps me appreciate how far above me his ways really are.

So it is against this backdrop of the Trinity that we begin our discussion of the Holy Spirit, because it is only the concept of the Trinity that allows our first statement about the Holy Spirit to be true, which is this:

**The Holy Spirit is God.**

Other spirits and physical beings have been created. But The Holy Spirit is eternal and existed as God before the beginning of time. How do we know that? It’s one thing to say we believe the Holy Spirit is God, that he’s part of the Trinity, but what is that belief based on? This is verified on at least two levels in the Bible. First,

## ***The Holy Spirit does the work of God.***

We learn this from the very first verses of the Bible.

### **Genesis 1:1-2**

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.*

The Spirit was involved in the creative process. In fact, the Hebrew word for spirit means breath, so when God breathed into Adam, he was giving him his spirit and making him a living being.

Another example of the Holy Spirit's activity is in the formation of the Bible. We call Scripture the Word of God. The Bible is God's book. We say he inspired it. But we could more specifically say the Holy Spirit inspired it.

### **2 Peter 1:21**

*For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*

Similarly, Paul wrote in 1 Timothy that all Scripture is "God-breathed", getting back to that same concept of the Spirit being the breath or life of God.

If there's a theme that runs through the Holy Spirit's activity, it is that it is life giving. We see that in creation. We see that in the inspiration of the Bible, as he breathes life into the text. And it is also what he does in our individual lives.

### **Romans 8:11**

*And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.*

The Christian faith isn't just agreeing to a list of truths printed on a piece of paper – it's about the work of the Holy Spirit creating new life in you and me. And that's something that no one but God himself can do. The Holy Spirit is involved in God's work – Life giving work, whether creation, inspiration of scripture, giving people new life spiritually or raising Christ from the dead. Only God can give life, and that's exactly what the Spirit does.

Secondly, ***the Holy Spirit has the qualities of God.***

Here are just a few examples. The Bible calls him the "Holy" Spirit and the "eternal" spirit – both qualities reserved for God alone. He is also omnipresent – meaning he is everywhere.

**Psalm 139:7**

*Where can I go from your Spirit?  
Where can I flee from your presence?*

The rest of us are tied to one place and time, but God's Spirit is universally present. The Spirit also has foreknowledge, the ability to know the future before it happens.

**Acts 1:15-16**

*In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) and said, "Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas..."*

That was hundreds of years before it happened. All of these – holiness, eternity, omnipresence, foreknowledge – point to the fact that the Holy Spirit is God.

We could go on with other qualities, but I think the point has been made. There is no question throughout the Old and New Testaments that the Holy Spirit is considered to be God.

To be even more precise, let's add one more description:

**The Holy Spirit is a person.**

This might feel like a very simple point, but it is an important distinction. Remember the power plant at the beginning? That is how a lot of people treat the Holy Spirit.

I used to have a CD of worship music with this one song on it by a big old choir. Let me tell you – they were having some church on that song. It was really upbeat and fun to listen to. But this is what the words said:

*Send it on down,  
Send it on down,  
Lord let the Holy Ghost come on down.*

The word there that bugged me was "it." Because the song turned the Holy Spirit into an it, and made it sound like it was nothing but a big protein shake from God. "Okay God – I'm needing a little boost. Can I have some more of that energy drink?"

When we view the Holy Spirit as an impersonal force, he's just a commodity we can use how we want, a power that we control. When we realize he's a person, it puts him back in charge. He's the power that controls us. He's the Sovereign Lord, free to use that power how he wants – not how we do.

Scripture shows us the personhood of the Spirit by showing

## **He has a mind.**

We're told in several places in the New Testament that the Spirit is an intelligent being who does things purposefully and in a reasoned way.

### **Romans 8:27**

*He who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit...*

### **1 Cor 2:11**

*For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.*

He is a thinking Spirit – not some kind of anonymous, mindless power source. The Holy Spirit sometimes gets a bad rap as causing all kinds of silliness and unexplainable activity. But he's rational. Paul calls him the Spirit of wisdom. We serve a God whose intellectual capacity is so superior to ours that we can have full confidence in what he knows and that he is not threatened by our questions and doubts. And he does not act without reason and a plan, any more than we would expect Jesus or God the Father to act without reason or a plan.

Another evidence of the Spirit's personal nature is that

## **He has a heart.**

If the Holy Spirit were nothing but a life force, he would be something like positive or negative energy. But you couldn't assign feelings to him. There might be degrees of power, but nothing as personal as you find in descriptions of the Holy Spirit. Listen to these verses and see if they sound like they could be describing anything but a person:

### **Romans 15:30**

*I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit...*

### **Ephesians 4:30**

*And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God...*

### **Acts 9:31**

*Then the church throughout Judea Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened and encouraged by the Holy Spirit...*

A force can't love. A force can't feel grief. A force can't offer you encouragement. But the Holy Spirit does.

Have you ever known anyone who was a Jehovah's Witness, or talked to them when they have come to your door? If you've ever thought, "This sounds close to what I believe, but I think it's different somehow," this is one critical point of difference. Jehovah's

Witnesses don't believe in either the deity or personality of the Holy Spirit. He's nothing more than an expression of power.

That viewpoint isn't consistent with Scripture, and I think it's a tragic loss on their part. Because it's extremely comforting to know that when we're dealing with the Holy Spirit, we're dealing with a caring, compassionate God and not just some nameless, faceless energy.

I've been reading the books *The Horse and His Boy* from the *Chronicles of Narnia*. In that book, the main character, Shasta, has had one long series of tough experiences, and he's lost and alone in dense fog on a cold mountain, and he's feeling sorry for himself and at the end of his rope. And C.S. Lewis writes this wonderful description of the Spirit of Aslan, the great lion who is a symbol of Christ, coming to Shasta and encouraging him. He walks beside him through the fog, listening to his story, and he breathes on him. In a little while, Shasta discovers that he has emerged from the fog, his spirits have been lifted, and the chapter ends with the words "and there were birds singing."

It is such a fitting picture of the work of the Holy Spirit, because it is so personal, and it reflects the heart of the Spirit on our behalf.

Because the Holy Spirit is God and because he is personal, that enables us to make one final observation about him this morning, which is this:

***The Holy Spirit is an adequate "fill-in" for Jesus.***

Just before Jesus died, he said this to his disciples:

**John 14:16**

*And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth.*

Normally, if a leader knows he or she is going to die or be removed, they will look around at the people closest to them and name their successor. But Jesus couldn't just appoint Peter or John to take his place after he died. They could not take his place. Only someone who was equally God could step in where Jesus left off.

So Christ asked the Father to send the Holy Spirit. After Jesus went back to heaven, that's exactly what happened. You read the story in the book of Acts and see how God poured out the Holy Spirit on his followers. And immediately, this little group of scared people suddenly had the courage and the power to do what Jesus had been doing in his ministry.

They carried on his work seamlessly. They preached powerful messages. They healed people. Lives were changed, by the hundred, by the thousands, by the millions. Christ's work has continued right down to today – not because of the power of a religious

movement, but because the Holy Spirit is poured out in the heart of each new believer, and all the power of the living God is still at work through his people.

The reality of the Holy Spirit for our lives today is every bit as meaningful and true as it was for those first disciples. We have in him a resource of courage and friendship and guidance and strength to live the Christian life. It makes all the difference in the world to know that Christ did not leave us alone with a rule book and say, "See you in heaven." He has an equal stand in, the Holy Spirit of God himself, who walks every step of the way with us.

As we prepare to remember the The Lord's Supper, I'll leave you with one verse;

**2 Corinthians 3:17**

*Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.*

God wants us to experience freedom. It's what he offers us through Christ's death. We're freed up from being punished for our sin, and we're freed from having to commit the sin anymore. That's the new reality. It's the Holy Spirit who brings that reality to life in each of us.

Are you feeling that freedom this morning? Do you have that personal relationship with Christ that comes when he places his Spirit in your heart?

Maybe you know that already, but you're going through a tough time. Maybe you're in a fog like Shasta this morning, and you need to hear his voice next to you in the dark. He wants to lead you back to a place where the birds are singing. He's personally concerned about you, and you can cling to that.

And if you're having a great week this week, take a moment to just worship him as God – a God who acts, who brings life wherever he goes and who continues to do today what he started when Jesus lived and died 2000 years ago. He's an awesome, powerful God. Let's praise him this morning.