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Who or what is the Holy Spirit?

The apostle Paul says a lot in his letter to the Romans about the Spirit and it is always helpful to compare one part of the Scriptures with another. So if we look a little further afield we will get an even clearer view of what the Holy Spirit is and does.

Nowadays some people talk a lot about the Spirit, sometimes saying that unless you have been “baptized in the Spirit”, or have “Spirit Gifts”, like the ability to speak in tongues or powers of healing, you are not a real Christian. But is that sort of talk right?

❖ Let the Bible Speak!

One of our key principles has been to let the Bible instruct us and we are not going to abandon that approach now. Even so, you might be surprised by what we are about to discover. How many times do you think we read about the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament? The really surprising thing is that there are only *three* such occurrences and here they are:

- 1 “Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your **Holy Spirit** from me” (Psalm 51:11);
- 2, 3 “In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. But they rebelled and grieved his **Holy Spirit**; therefore he turned to be their enemy, and himself fought against them. Then he remembered the days of old, of Moses and his people. Where is he who brought them up out of the sea with the shepherds of his flock? Where is he who put in the midst of them his **Holy Spirit**, who caused his glorious arm to go at the right hand of Moses? ...” (Isaiah 63:9-12).

❖ What does it mean?

The very first occurrence, in Psalm 51, is part of a prayer by King David in which he wholeheartedly repents of what he had done: first taking someone else's wife as his own and then arranging for her husband's murder! In that psalm, which was later set to music and used as part of the temple worship, the king deeply repents of the wrong he has done. He had been so close to God and much in His favour, including being a prophet through whom God spoke.¹ He very much wanted to be forgiven, to have his fellowship with God restored, and to have that previous relationship restored, including being God's prophet once again.

We can see this more clearly if we look at the accompanying verses. It is always best to look at a passage in its setting, or context, to get the right meaning. Pulling out a verse here or there can lead to misunderstanding. So here is David's full request to God:

*"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and **renew a right spirit within me**. Cast me not away from your presence, and **take not your Holy Spirit from me**. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and **uphold me with a willing spirit**" (Psalm 51:10-12).*

This is really helpful in understanding about the Spirit, because it shows us that the word has a wide range of meaning. David is asking:

- 1 That God will cleanse him of his sin and purge his conscience – for as an adulterer and murderer he could have had no peace of mind and must have felt alienated from God. He calls that having "*a right spirit*"; we might say that *he wanted to be right with God again* in the way he both thought and felt;
- 2 As we anticipated, David wanted *to continue as one of God's prophets* and be empowered by that Holy Spirit

¹ At the end of his life David says this about the privilege of being God's spokesperson: "The Spirit of the Lord speaks by me; his word is on my tongue. The God of Israel has spoken; the Rock of Israel has said to me ..." (2 Samuel 23:2,3). And the New Testament also recognises David's inspired words as Scripture, "... which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David" (Acts 1:16).

that enabled men and women to be God's spokespersons;²

- 3 David wanted more than just to feel right with God and become his spokesman again; he wanted God to help him recapture that positive delight in doing His will that he had earlier enjoyed – *he wanted to be a willing servant who rejoiced in God's salvation*, not just someone who was afraid to step out of line for fear of the consequences.

But why does King David call the ability God had given him to speak as a prophet God's *Holy Spirit*, when that term had never been used before and David would never use it again? ³ It was because he had come to realise how sinful he was and how holy God is. So he was praying that a *holy* God would still continue to use him as part of His great purpose, and God responded graciously to that prayer and continued to be close to David all through the rest of his life – despite the two great sins he had committed.

So when David called God's Spirit his "*Holy Spirit*", he was thinking about God's power being directed to achieve holiness. He wasn't holy: he knew that he was a sinner. But he recognised that God is holy and that everything He does will be holy and eventually leads to holiness.

❖ What about Isaiah?

The prophet Isaiah was not concerned directly about his own sinfulness but about the sinfulness of God's people Israel, both in the past and in the present. The work that God had given him to do as a prophet involved trying to get the people among whom he lived to change their ways and want to be holy, like God.

In the verses we looked at (Isaiah 63:9-12), the prophet is reviewing Israel's history right back at the time when they came out of Egypt, as recorded in the Book of Exodus. His theme is the wonderful mercy of God which He shows regardless of human response. He had rescued Israel even

² "For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). It is clear that the possession of such a privileged gift gave the prophets a remarkable sense of the presence of God in their lives, which is what David is also asking for.

³ Remember that the term only occurs 3 times in all of the Old Testament.

though He knew they would not be obedient and faithful; but His foreknowledge didn't mean that God was indifferent to their response. He wanted them to be obedient and He was really grieved when they became rebellious and mean-minded.

God had given the children of Israel a powerful angel to lead them through the wilderness of Sinai into the Promised Land. God's angels are not 'flesh and blood' like us; they are spirit creatures, as several Scriptures teach us.⁴ That means they belong to another and higher order of beings, for they are God's servants who dwell in His presence. Angels are holy and wholesome in every respect. So, in Israel's wilderness journey, the angel of God's presence was there to guide, guard and preserve them all the way to their journey's end. But instead of living according to God's holy law, the Israelites "*rebelled and grieved*" God's representative, who is here twice described as "*God's Holy Spirit*".

The angel is described in this way because the people of Israel were anything but holy – they were rebellious. Yet the angel was totally obedient to God's will. He was holy; they were not and, as a result, that entire generation perished in the wilderness. So, once again, the term "Holy Spirit" is used to contrast the wickedness of people with the holiness of God.

❖ God at Work

So, on the three occasions when God's Spirit is described as the "Holy Spirit" in the Old Testament Scriptures it refers to:

- ✓ God working through a prophet, or
- ✓ God working through an angel.

In both cases the deliberate comparison is between people who are sinful and God who is holy and righteous in all His ways. He cannot be anything else; that's how He always

⁴ *The key thing to remember about God's angels is that Scripture says they are His messengers, spirit-beings who live forever, and they are so free from sin that they dwell in the presence of Almighty God. The New Testament says they are "ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation" (Hebrews 1:14). So the very idea that an angel, or angels, could sin and be cast out of heaven is completely wrong and a great insult to the angels.*

is and always will be. Everything God does is done by His Spirit, for this is how God works, but when that activity is specifically designed to achieve holiness, or when God's character is considered side-by-side with human rebellion, then God's Spirit is termed His Holy Spirit. That expression comes just 3 times in the Old Testament, as we have seen, but more than 90 times in the New, where the whole emphasis changes. For the New Testament is very much concerned about the way in which God can help individuals achieve personal holiness.

That doesn't mean that God is not interested in holiness in the Old Testament, or that His power was then usually directed towards ordinary and not extraordinary things. What it shows is that God's work was of a different order when He caused His Son to be born. Let's see if we can work that out by studying the things that God did by His Spirit in the Old Testament first. Then we will look at what happens with the birth of Jesus and in the lives of those who followed him.

❖ Old Testament Usage

Again, if you would like to track down the relevant Old Testament references for yourself, you can build a table of different activities. Or, if you prefer, you can just jot down the references from the following table and look those passages up to see what God's Spirit was doing at different times, then compare your conclusions with those suggested. Remember, this book is all about how we can understand the Bible for ourselves.

Usually, when building a table like this, we would list the passages in the order they appear in the Bible. This time we have listed the passages to show the way that Spirit activity in the past accomplished several things of a quite different nature. So the table is constructed to trace the way in which one thing led to another, as God made the physical world, gave life to people, and then directed His power to show people how they could become holy, like Him.

Verse	God's Activity
Genesis 1:2	<i>"The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters"</i> – God was active in creation by His Spirit.
Job 33:4	<i>"The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life".</i> God breathed into Adam the breath (or spirit) of life and man became a living being (Genesis 2:7). So, our very life is a gift from God.
1 Samuel 10:1	<i>"The Spirit of God rushed upon him, and he prophesied among them".</i> Many times the Spirit of God, or just <i>"the Spirit"</i> is said to have given prophetic or other powers to people (e.g. Numbers 11:25; 24:2; 2 Chronicles 15:1; Ezekiel 2:2; 11:5,24; Micah 3:8).
Exodus 31:3	<i>"I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship".</i> This passage refers to special abilities which were given to craftsmen who were to build God's dwelling place – the Tabernacle. Many other passages describe the way that special gifts were given by God – gifts such as wisdom, administrative skill, judgement and even physical power (see Numbers 11:25; Deuteronomy 34:9; Judges 14:19). These were Spirit gifts.
Isaiah 11:2,3	<i>"The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord".</i> This passage tells us that the coming king – the Messiah – will be empowered by God so that he will be a wise counsellor and a very gifted ruler (see also Isaiah 61:1). ⁵

It's clear from these verses that God was active in a whole range of different ways to do with the creation and maintenance of His world, and its various creatures. His Spirit power first brought life into being and, to this day, it is God who gives the gift of life to humans and animals alike. We have already noted that *"God gives to all mankind life and breath and everything"* (Acts 17:25), and that if God takes that life away, we are all dead!⁶

❖ **Range of Meanings**

Very often when the word *"spirit"* is used it refers to the life-force that is in man or woman, either physically, mentally or emotionally. We read about a great lady who was breathless with amazement – Scripture says *"there was no more spirit in her"* (1 Kings 10:5 RSV),⁷ about an Egyptian king who woke up in the morning troubled in spirit (Genesis 41:8); and about a father who was overjoyed in spirit when he knew that his long-lost son was in fact alive (Genesis 45:27). This is an important development in the use of the word, for it shows us that God created life and sustains it, by His Spirit, but that life is more than mere existence.

Life is a power or force that enables us to think, feel, love, hate, be happy and be sad. The *"spirit of man"* is a term that describes his existence and his awareness; it refers as much to his being alive as to his mental and moral development.

The passages we have looked at, both those in the table and the three Old Testament references to God's Holy Spirit, give us some idea of the range of meaning the word *"spirit"* possesses. It helps us realise that, in the Old Testament, the language is very much concerned with:

- ✓ the way God was working with the earth He created,
- ✓ the people He had brought into existence,

⁵ The passage from Isaiah chapter 61 is the one the Lord Jesus read in the synagogue at Nazareth when he went on to say that *"Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing"* (Luke 4:21).

⁶ Chapter 5, pages 58-61.

⁷ The English Standard version says *"there was no more breath in her"*, for the same Hebrew word can be translated as *"spirit"* or *"breath"*.

- ✓ the message He conveyed to them through prophets, and by promises, and
- ✓ the reaction or response of men and women.

How people responded to God's Spirit in *their* spirit was an all-important matter. They had *existence*, but would they find life as it was really meant to be lived – life with God? That's a question that is just as relevant for us, living so much later than Old Testament times.

❖ Is the Holy Spirit a Person?

There are people who believe that the Holy Spirit is a part of the Trinity and that it is as much a person as are the Father and the Son. People feel very strongly indeed about this and even go so far as to say that those who come to different conclusions are not even Christians. Church creeds, formulated hundreds of years later than the Bible, declared the Trinity to be “orthodox doctrine,” and made belief in it a requirement for salvation, so far as the established church is concerned. The real question, of course, is: ‘What does the Bible teach about the Holy Spirit, and does it say that the Holy Spirit is a Person or something else?’

The very first place where we read about God's Spirit should help us answer that. Here it is, in the opening verses of the Bible:

*“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And **the Spirit of God** was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Genesis 1:1-3).*

God created the world by His Spirit, for when God spoke He directed His power to fulfil His purpose. Look at these Scriptures which describe what happened in slightly different ways. None of them suggests that God's Holy Spirit is a person:

*“By the **word of the LORD** the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host ... For **he spoke, and it came to be**; he commanded, and it stood firm” (Psalm 33:6,9);*

*“It is I who **by my great power** and my outstretched arm have made the earth, with the men and animals that are on the earth, and I give it to whomever it seems right to me” (Jeremiah 27:5);⁸*

*“It is he who made the earth **by his power**, who established the world **by his wisdom**, and **by his understanding** stretched out the heavens” (Jeremiah 10:12);*

*“For his invisible attributes, namely, **his eternal power and divine nature**, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” (Romans 1:20).*

❖ A Power not a Person

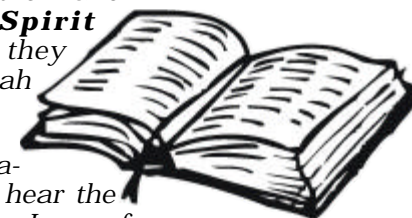
God made the world by the exercise of His *great power*, according to His *wisdom* and understanding, by His *Spirit*. These are different ways of saying the same thing. Everything that God does is by His Spirit, for that is the language used in Scripture to describe God's almighty power. So the Holy Spirit is not a person but a power – God's power – by which great things are accomplished.

That power gives us “*life and breath and everything*” (Acts 17:25) including special, revealed knowledge of the purpose of God, because it is by His Spirit that God communicates:

*“**The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me; his word is on my tongue**” (2 Samuel 23:2);*

*“Many years you bore with them and warned them **by your Spirit** through your prophets. Yet they would not give ear” (Nehemiah 9:30);*

*“They made their hearts diamond-hard lest they should hear the law and the words that the LORD of hosts had sent **by his Spirit** through the former prophets” (Zechariah 7:12).*



⁸ See also Jeremiah 32:17; 51:15, where the same terms are used.

❖ The Holy Spirit and Jesus

So far we have seen what the Old Testament says about God's power at work. But will all this change when we get to the New Testament, where the term is much more frequent? Will we find the meaning to be different here? People who only read the New Testament fail to understand that Bible ideas carry through from the Old to the New. God's purpose and ways never change: they progress. So a good understanding of the Old Testament really helps us with the New.

Let's put that to the test by looking at the first three occurrences of the term "Holy Spirit" in the New Testament.

- 1,2 *"Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the **Holy Spirit** ... Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the **Holy Spirit**" (Matthew 1:18-20);*
- 3 *"I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the **Holy Spirit** and with fire" (Matthew 3:11).*

God's power was at work again, not now to create the world, but to redeem or rescue it. Things were in such a bad state that only God could save the situation. So He caused a Son to be born to Mary, by the exercise of His Spirit. This is how the gospel writer Luke describes what she was told about the birth of Jesus:

*"The **Holy Spirit** will come upon you, and the power of the **Most High** will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God" (Luke 1:35).*

So it was that the power of God brought the Lord Jesus into being and that same power was later given to Jesus at his baptism, and by that power he was able both to do miracles and to declare the words of God.

*"The **Holy Spirit** descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, 'You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased' ... And Jesus,*

full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness" (Luke 3:22; 4:1);

*"God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the **Holy Spirit** and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him" (Acts 10:38);*

"For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure" (John 3:34).

❖ Jesus exercising God's Power

Everything Jesus did was by the exercise of God's power. He said so over and over again, in case people thought that what he was doing and saying was just for himself and by himself:

"The testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me" (John 5:36);

"It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is of no avail. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (6:63);

"Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves" (14:10,11).

Both Father and Son were working together to accomplish our salvation. The Father had created the Lord Jesus Christ and had empowered him to accomplish His purpose. The Son was willing and eager to cooperate with what his Father wanted. Theirs was a perfect unity; they were at one and, as we have seen, they want us to be equally united with them in purpose and in resolve.⁹

⁹ See John 17:18-23 for the clearest possible statement that Jesus and his Father shared a complete unity of purpose, and that they want us to be part of that same relationship.

The exercise of God’s power in accordance with His great love for us is designed to bring us to perfection, just as it first achieved that for the Lord Jesus. For the same power that had created and enabled Jesus to do and say wonderful things would later raise him from the dead. And that very power is also at work to achieve all that God purposes for His children in all ages. For everything that God does is by the power of His Holy Spirit.¹⁰

❖ **Holy Spirit in Action**

When we reviewed the working of God’s Spirit in the Old Testament, we noted that God’s power was directed to achieve several different things. In the table we compiled on page 230 they were:

No	Verse	God’s Activity
1	Genesis 1:2	God was active in Creation by His Spirit.
2	Job 33:4	Our very life is a gift from God.
3	1 Samuel 10:1	The Spirit gives prophetic or other powers to people.
4	Exodus 31:3	Special abilities were given to craftsmen who were to build God’s dwelling place – the Tabernacle – and other gifts were given by God, such as wisdom and administrative skill.
5	Isaiah 11:2,3	The coming king – the Messiah – was to be empowered by God so that he would be a wise counsellor and a much gifted ruler.

Now we can see why the language has changed in the New Testament. It is to concentrate our attention on God’s

¹⁰ We considered this in Chapter 15 pages 224-227.

eventual intention of make His people holy and righteous in His sight. He means to fill the new-made world with people who are like Him, who are adopted as His sons and daughters. So it follows that each of the activities listed above is also appropriate in the New Testament, but on a higher level, as follows:

- 1 God is now in the process of undertaking a **new creation**, in that He is inviting men and women to prepare for the new world that will come into existence when the Lord Jesus Christ returns to earth as King. That new creation begins for us at baptism: *“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come”* (2 Corinthians 5:17), and it will be completed when the Lord Jesus returns to establish a new world order. Then he will say: *“Behold, I am making all things new”* (Revelation 21:5).
- 2 Everybody living today has been given the precious **gift of life** by God and thus has the opportunity to find out about God’s purpose and love towards us. Our mortal existence is bound to end in death, but if we choose **God’s offer of eternal life** we can be part of that new creation when Jesus reigns as God’s appointed king: *“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Romans 6:23). Paul urges all his readers to live *“according to the Spirit”* and to *“set their minds on the things of the Spirit”* (Romans 8:5). He is encouraging them, and us, to make the most of God’s offer of life.
- 3 The way to find out about eternal life is by reading and understanding the **Scriptures** that have come from God by the exercise of those **prophetic powers** that were granted to people in times past. The full purpose of God has now been revealed and we are told that we should beware of any suggestion to the contrary. For the New Testament ends with the words: *“I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book”* (Revelation 22:18).
- 4 The completion of the Scriptures and the establishment of Christianity in the first century was achieved by God-given **special abilities and powers**, called *“gifts of the*

Holy Spirit” (Hebrews 2:4). In Old Testament times these were provided so that a dwelling place for God would be established. This was a physical habitation, first a tabernacle and then a temple. In the New Testament scriptures it is a spiritual abode that God wants established. He wants to dwell in His people (Ephesians 2:21-22). So, to show that the gospel was true and to help those who were given the responsibility of preaching and teaching, God gave certain people special gifts which would last until the Christian community, in which God would dwell, had been established.

- 5 Jesus exercised the **Holy Spirit powers of the Messiah** during his life on earth and will do so again when he returns in that same power to establish and rule over the Kingdom of God.

❖ Gifts of the Holy Spirit

The special powers that were given to the apostles were for a specific reason and for a limited time. There had been other such occasions in the history of redemption, such as when Moses led God’s people out of Egypt, attended by remarkable miracles; when the tabernacle was being built in the wilderness and when the prophets Elijah and Elisha made God’s final appeal to the northern tribes.¹¹ In all those cases the divinely granted powers served their purpose and were then withdrawn.

It was the same in first century times. God gave special powers to selected people so that they could demonstrate that they were His representatives, teaching the true gospel. But it was also made clear that when the gospel had been fully recorded, those special powers or gifts would cease. They would then have fulfilled their purpose.

❖ Purpose

“These signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents with their hands; and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover

¹¹ The Exodus from Egypt is described in Exodus chapters 1-15; the building of the Tabernacle is in Exodus chapters 25-40; the Spirit-gifted work of Elijah and Elisha feature in 1 Kings chapter 17 to 2 Kings chapter 13.

... And they went out and preached everywhere, while **the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by accompanying signs**” (Mark 16:17-20);

“How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while **God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will**” (Hebrews 2:3,4);

“He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, **to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ ...**” (Ephesians 4:11,12).

❖ Duration

“... **until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God**, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children...” (Ephesians 4:13,14);

“We know in part and we prophesy in part, but **when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away**. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:9-12).

Jesus made a wide range of Holy Spirit gifts available after his ascension to heaven, the most complete list being in the following passage:¹²

“To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of **wisdom**, and to another the utterance of **knowledge** according to the same Spirit, to another **faith** by the same Spirit, to another **gifts of healing** by the one Spirit, to another the working of **miracles**, to another **prophecy**, to another the **ability to distinguish between spirits**, to another various **kinds of tongues**, to another the **interpretation of tongues**” (1 Corinthians 12:8-10).

¹² Similar lists are to be found in 1 Corinthians 12:28, Romans 12:3-8 and Ephesians 4:7-11.

❖ Laying on of Hands

It is quite obvious from this list, and from the one in Mark 16 cited above, that the Holy Spirit gifts were just what were needed. By these the apostles could understand the gospel, preach it in different languages and perform ‘signs and wonders.’ These would help people understand that the message came from God. Just how that worked out for the apostles we can see by reading the accounts of their preaching and healing in the Acts of the Apostles.

One other detail we discover in the Acts is how the gifts were passed on as the gospel spread from city to city. The new believers were also in need of signs that would authenticate their ministry and the original apostles of Jesus were able to pass on the gifts by simply laying their hands on the new believers. Sometimes that necessitated a special trip from Jerusalem, or wherever they were then based, but it was the only way the gift could be transmitted. Here’s one example:

*“Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then **they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.** Now when Simon saw that **the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands**, he offered them money, saying, ‘Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit’” (Acts 8:14-19).*

Simon could see the way the power was transmitted and wanted that ability himself. He was told in no uncertain terms that he could not have that ability – far less buy it. You had to be one of the apostles of the Lord Jesus for that. The consequence of this was that when the apostles died out at the end of the first century, their powers died with them and the Gifts that had been conferred also disappeared with the passage of time.

As the first century faith became mature or fully grown up, the earlier need for signs and wonders was reduced. The New Testament Scriptures became available and were circulated to believers in different cities. Thus the plan and

purpose of God became crystal-clear to all who read it, thought about it, and chose to follow the footsteps of those who had gone before. As Paul explains in his letter to the Ephesians, Jesus gave the gifts *“to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ ... until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood”* (Ephesians 4:11-14).

❖ Was Anything Left?

The Holy Spirit gifts have passed. People who now claim to perform miracles of healing, or speak in tongues are not exercising God’s power in the way it was demonstrated in first century times. They may be tapping into powers of persuasion like mass hysteria or auto-suggestion, but this is not the miraculous power of God at work as it was in New Testament times. You only have to read the Acts of the Apostles to see the difference; there the blind were given sight, the lame were made whole and even the dead were raised. What happened then was clearly supernatural.

But it would be equally wrong to say that everything to do with the Holy Spirit has gone today. God did so many things by that Spirit which we know about and benefit from today. He caused Jesus to be born, gave him power and understanding, raised him from the dead and exalted him to glory, gave him the gift of endless life. All those things have an on-going value for us, as we learn to come to God in prayer through Jesus Christ and discover that we have a mediator who can help us in our search for salvation.

We know about Jesus and indeed about all who have been part of God’s plan of salvation because we read about them in the Bible, itself the product of God’s Holy Spirit power. The Bible is a book of promises and those promises too are the product of the Holy Spirit. They make the Bible a living and powerful message from God – words of *“Spirit and life”* (John 6:63). The Bible can change the way we think, feel and act, if we let it – it’s that powerful:

- *The gospel of salvation is the “**law of the spirit of life**” (Romans 8:3);¹³*
- *“We also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, **the word of God, which is at work in you believers**” (1 Thessalonians 2:13);*
- *We are “**born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for ... the word of the Lord remains forever.**” And **this word is the good news that was preached to you**” (1 Peter 1:23-25);*
- *“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. **Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth**, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creation” (James 1:17,18).*

This is the new life – the life of the Spirit – that we have been reading and thinking about in Romans chapter 8. And after this digression, to look at the meaning of the Spirit of God and the Holy Spirit, we need to pick up the apostle’s argument once more to see what else he has to say about the gospel of salvation.

Things to Read

- 📖 It would be helpful to see how God gave special Holy Spirit powers to craftsmen in Old Testament times to enable them to build Him a dwelling place called “The Tabernacle”. Read Exodus chapter 35 and onwards if you want to learn a little more about the dwelling place that God specified.

¹³ *It is what the Holy Spirit has promised to believers by way of remission of sins and a new life in Christ which led the apostle Peter to say, on the Day of Pentecost: “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself” (Acts 2:38,39). He was referring to God’s gift of salvation, by faith.*

- 📖 Now read 1 Corinthians chapters 12 and 13 to see a similar pattern in the early church, where gifts were given to get a different sort of dwelling place established – a community of believers.

Questions to Think About

- 16.1 Summarise some of the different meanings the word “*spirit*” can have in the Bible and explain in just one sentence what the term “*Holy Spirit*” is specifically referring to. (Genesis 1:1-3; 41:8; Numbers 14:24; Job 34:14; Ecclesiastes 3:21; 2 Samuel 23:2; 2 Peter 1:21; Acts 2:1-4)
- 16.2 How was the gift of the Holy Spirit transmitted from believer to believer in first century days and why was it therefore bound to come to an end by the beginning of the next century? (Acts 8:18; 1 Timothy 4:14; Hebrews 6:2)



“When they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women” (Acts 8:12).