

Refocus

THE HOLY SPIRIT

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Introduction

Welcome to this study guide on the Holy Spirit. It is ideal for use especially in the weeks between Easter and Pentecost, but of course it can be used at any time of year.

It can seem easier to relate to God the Father or to Jesus Christ, the Son who entered time and space, than to the Holy Spirit.

What's more, questions around the Spirit and a life filled by him can cause dissent and even divisions among believers. Some don't seem to get enough of the Spirit, while others don't quite know what to do with him.

So how are we meant to picture, understand and experience God the Spirit? This study won't give you all the answers, but it will steer the conversation towards asking the right questions.

Step by step, session by session, you'll uncover and delve deeper into what Scripture reveals about that mysterious third person of the Trinity, and quite possibly you'll end up finding it a transformative experience; for, after all, 'it is the spirit that gives life' (John 6.63).

There are at least three ways to use these studies.

- In a small group: Working in a group, with or without a leader, means that we can help one another with the Bible passages or discussion topics that some might find more difficult than others. It also helps each person to keep going, right to the end. There are prayers, Bible readings and discussion questions which can all be shared out among the group members.
- On your own: The advantage of this approach is that you can read a section of the study and then

explore the related parts of the Bible at your leisure, particularly if they are unfamiliar to you or especially catch your interest. Most of the questions are well suited, or easily adapted, to personal study.

- As a reference guide: This booklet has been designed so that it will fit into most handbags and even the inside pocket of a jacket. So, like your mobile phone, you can always have it with you. Of course, this option is valid alongside the other two – it does not have to be ‘either/or’. No one can absorb all that this study guide offers at the first reading. It is meant to become your friend, always there when you need it.

Content of the studies

There are six main sessions of study material in this book, exploring many aspects of what the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, tells us about the Holy Spirit. The word FOCUS is used as an acronym to structure each session, as follows:

- **Foreword:** This sets the scene for the session, with an opening prayer and some introductory information.
- **Overview:** An introductory summary of the topic being considered in the session.
- **Consider:** A key Bible passage or theme, offering the chance to consider something that may be especially interesting or puzzling.
- **Understand:** The main Bible passages to be explored, with group discussion questions to share. These studies are split into three sections, so that you can allocate one section to up to three smaller groups if you wish.
- **Summary:** This section gathers the whole session together, summarising the main points of the study.

Each session then ends with a ‘Refocus’ section, which gives space to note down particular insights gained, along with action points and prayer requests to carry forward.

Guidance for group leaders

Leading

Your focus should always be to lead your group in the most helpful and appropriate way.

- If it is a new group, you will probably want to encourage people to introduce themselves before the first session gets fully underway.
- For any group, you may want to have some spare Bibles ready in case people forget their own.
- Encourage everyone to become involved in the conversation, and gently steer those who may tend to dominate it.
- A prayer is included in the ‘Foreword’ section, to start the session, but it is up to you whether you choose to use it or whether you prefer to have a time of prayer at the end of the session.
- Please feel free to adapt and use the material in ways that best help your group.

Continuity

Some groups have one leader throughout, but others prefer to rotate the leading. In the latter case, please take extra care about continuity.

- Some people may have missed the previous session, so it can be helpful to start with a brief recap.
- Some people may have carried out some further reading or research between sessions. Providing opportunities for them to feed back may be good for the whole group – but be careful about time.
- At the end of the session, alert people to the next topic and encourage them to familiarise themselves with the content.

Getting the most out of the Bible passages



In the ‘Consider’ and ‘Understand’ sections, we will look at one or more key Bible passages. (Wherever there are passages to be read, you will find this open book icon in the margin.) There are several ways to help the group take in the significance of these Bible readings.

- One person can read the whole passage.
- The passage can be broken up into sections and different voices (even different translations) used for the reading.
- People can be asked to close their eyes and simply listen to the passage being read by the leader.
- The group can read the passage silently before discussions begin.
- If there is more than one passage, sometimes it is helpful to leave a pause of 30 seconds between them, so that people can recall or ‘live in’ that passage before moving on.
- Group members can be asked to follow the passage in their own Bibles and, if the translation is different, to comment on the differences they notice. (The version usually quoted in this study guide is the NRSV.)

Using a variety of approaches over the six sessions can help add interest and keep things fresh. The important thing is to ensure that group members pay careful attention to the key passages, so that they are the focus of the discussions that follow.

There is a lot of study material in each session. If your group is large enough, you may wish to split it into smaller subgroups to work on different passages.



Getting the most out of the group discussion questions

Questions are provided to help the group engage together with the Bible studies. (Wherever there are questions to discuss, you will find this group icon in the margin.) There is no need to deal with all the questions, nor all at the same depth.

- As leader, you may have sensed through the earlier sections which discussion questions will be most significant for your group.
- Alternatively, you could ask the group which questions they want to work with.

Preparation for study

Before the first session, there is a short ‘Preparation for study’ section, which offers some introductory thoughts and questions. These two pages can be photocopied and distributed to group members in advance, to encourage them to come prepared to the first meeting. They are also available to download, free of charge, from biblesociety.org.uk/holyspirit.

Guidance for group members

Every member of the group has an important contribution to make.

- Be willing to share your own experiences on a number of issues, to the extent that you feel comfortable doing so.
- Carefully read (or listen to) the biblical passages and other material. Each of us is likely to discern different things from the passages and the topic as a whole, and sharing these discoveries will benefit everyone.
- Within the group, always try to ‘respond well’. This includes being prompt in attending meetings, being sensitive to other members and encouraging them by listening attentively and sympathetically. Such responses can greatly enhance everyone’s experience and learning.
- Allow the group leader(s) to guide and shape the study time. It is also good to pray for your leader(s) as they prepare for each session and lead the group.
- Bringing a Bible, and occasionally other things as requested, indicates real involvement. Through this demonstration of commitment, other members will gain an enhanced sense of the value of the time spent together.

Our prayer is that this study guide will help you discover more of what the Bible has to teach us about the Day of Pentecost, who the Holy Spirit is, and some of the changes that he can make in the church, in our personal lives and in the wider world.

Preparation for study

Pentecost (also known as Whitsun) is one of the great festival Sundays of the Christian Church – a time when we celebrate and remember the coming of the Holy Spirit to a gathering of the first 120 disciples in Jerusalem.

Until fairly recently in the United Kingdom, ‘Whit Monday’ was also a public celebration, with street marches, banners and bands. Sometimes these marches would be organised by the churches, particularly the Sunday schools, and sometimes by the Trade Unions. There was something very appropriate about it, as the ‘first’ Pentecost for the church was also a very colourful and public event, with many people turning to Christ.

Are you aware of attempts by the churches to make a more public event of Pentecost again? Some Councils of Churches have organised ‘Pentecost Picnics’ or Christian ‘fairs’ to promote mission or offer prayer and other support in a town square. Do you know of anything being done in your locality to celebrate Pentecost? Do you consider that these are appropriate expressions of Pentecost?

What about our churches’ celebration of the Day of Pentecost? How can we mark it properly, not just on one Sunday of the year but every day of the year? It is clear from the book of Acts that the developing church was shaped, resourced, transformed and protected because of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that we read about in Acts 2 – so much so that some people rename ‘The Acts of the Apostles’ as ‘The Acts of the Holy Spirit’.

Without reading it, write down all you can recall of Acts chapter 2, which recounts the sending of the Holy Spirit on the disciples. Now read through the chapter and see what you remembered correctly, what you got wrong and what you missed out. What influences our memories? Is it sermons, hymns and songs, or personal experiences? (Don't worry if you recalled very little – the following six studies will fill in the gaps in your knowledge!)

While Pentecost is no longer a public celebration and has passed out of common memory, Christians across the churches have given more attention to the Holy Spirit over recent decades. This has also led to renewed attempts to appreciate the full reality of God – the Trinity.

Many people see great benefits in this new awareness of God's Spirit in the life of Christians and the churches. Among them are:

- Greater freedom in worship with many new worship songs
- A stronger sense of compassion and fellowship within local congregations
- A willingness to 'dare greatly' for God, including new expressions of evangelism, missional church and healing ministry
- A new impetus to (re)discover unity
- A new emphasis on social justice among many churches

Do you think the renewed emphasis on the ministry of the Holy Spirit has been helpful to you (as an individual), to your local Christian community and to the churches nationwide, of all denominations? In your experience have there been any downsides to this new emphasis?

SESSION 1

Pentecost and the Old Testament

FOREWORD

In this session we will look at the Old Testament's insights about the Holy Spirit through the lens of Acts 2, which is the biblical basis for our understanding of the Day of Pentecost. Even a quick reading of Acts 2 will reveal many different connections to the Old Testament and the Jewish faith.

Prayer

The group facilitator may wish to open the session with this prayer:

Living God, we thank you that you prepared for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Christian community as the story of the Old Testament unfolded. Help us, like those first disciples, to be prepared for the gift you promised to send, as we journey through these Scriptures. Amen

Pentecost was one of the three 'Great Festivals' of the Jewish faith (and was exceedingly popular with devout Jews who lived away from Judah, who would make pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost). We can see this reflected in the list of pilgrims' nationalities in Acts 2.9–11.

The word 'Pentecost' means '50th' and its significance is that the festival took place 50 days after the Passover

The other two 'Great Festivals' were Passover (see Exodus 12.1–20; 23.15) and Tabernacles (Exodus 23.16; Leviticus 23.33–43).

Sabbath. Because this time period was counted as 7×7 days, it was also known as ‘The Feast of Weeks’ (Leviticus 23.15–16; Deuteronomy 16.9–10). It originally celebrated the wheat harvest and involved the offering of two loaves of leavened bread in the temple. In later Judaism (second century AD) it was considered to be the day when the law was given at Sinai.

It was on the Day of Pentecost that the Holy Spirit impacted the disciples and, through them, the crowd who came to see what was going on. Even though they could tell that many languages were being used by the disciples, and knew that they were praising God, the people were puzzled by it all. So Peter attempted to explain it to them, beginning with a quotation from one of the Old Testament prophets – Joel.

OVERVIEW

One of the connections made in Acts 2 is between God’s Spirit and prophecy. Prophecy is the expression of the visions and dreams that people have received from God. By implication, this is what the people are hearing from the disciples ‘in our own language’ as they speak ‘about God’s deeds of power’ (v. 11).

In fact, though, it is not very common for the writings of the major prophets to be linked closely with the gift of God’s Spirit. Nehemiah 9.30 makes a connection (‘you ... warned them by your spirit through your prophets’: see also Zechariah 7.12), but the prophets themselves speak, rather, of God’s ‘word’ coming to them. Ezekiel is the main exception: he claims that the Spirit of the Lord ‘fell upon me’ or ‘lifted me up’ (Ezekiel 11.5; 43.5). This reluctance to make the link may be because the ‘Spirit’ and prophecy were associated with bizarre ecstatic phenomena rather than an understanding that the content was from God (see 1 Samuel 10.6,10).

Nevertheless, we will find some important insights into the role of God’s Spirit in the prophecies of Joel, Ezekiel and Isaiah, as well as the books of Genesis and Judges.

CONSIDER

Joel's prophecy

Ask a group member to read Acts 2.17–21 aloud from their own Bible.



As we begin to consider how an understanding of the Old Testament will help us in our study of the Holy Spirit, we shall concentrate first on this passage, which is Peter's quotation from Joel 2.28–32.

The key line is, 'In those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy' (v. 18b).

As individuals, consider this passage for a while, and write on sticky notes your thoughts on the following questions.

- What do you find interesting or significant in this passage?
- What do you find strange or puzzling?
- What would you like to know more about?

Then share your insights and questions with the group as a whole.

Finally, as a group, list any ways in which knowledge of the Old Testament and the Jewish faith is required to make the best sense of Acts chapter 2.

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Joel was a prophet but we know very little else about him. Dates for his prophecy range from the eighth to the fourth century BC. He, like Amos, warns of God's coming judgement on his people, which will be like a swarm of locusts. Joel emphasises 'the Day of the Lord', but he also pleads with God's people to repent. God's promise is that he will then more than compensate for their suffering. The climax of God's promise is that he will pour his Spirit on all his people.

UNDERSTAND

As well as the emphasis on prophecy, the Old Testament provides many other insights into the role and reality of God's Spirit.

You may choose to explore all of the passages below or just some of them. Split into smaller study groups if necessary, and share your thoughts in the whole group at the end.

Group 1) The source of power

In the book of Judges, God's Spirit is connected with unusual empowering for a given task. Because it is God's Spirit, the task is to do with carrying out God's purposes, but the emphasis seems to be on the extraordinary power that the recipients receive.



Ask a group member or members to read the following passages:

The spirit of the Lord came upon [Othniel], and he judged Israel; he went out to war, and the Lord gave King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram into his hand; and his hand prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim.

Judges 3.10

But the spirit of the Lord took possession of Gideon; and he sounded the trumpet, and the Abiezrites were called out to follow him.

Judges 6.34

The spirit of the Lord rushed on [Samson], and he tore the lion apart with his bare hands as one might tear apart a kid ... Then the spirit of the Lord rushed on him, and he went down to Ashkelon. He killed thirty men of the town, took their spoil, and gave the festal garments to those who had explained the riddle. In hot anger he went back to his father's house.

Judges 14.6,19

When [Samson] came to Lehi, the Philistines came shouting to meet him; and the spirit of the Lord rushed on him, and the ropes that were on his arms became like flax that has caught fire, and his bonds melted off his hands.

Judges 15.14



Discuss the following questions:

- What do you think we can learn about God's Spirit from these passages?
- What might be lacking (or even dangerous) for us as Christians if we only had these passages to help us understand God's Spirit?

- What relationships can you see between these passages and Acts 2? What differences are there?

Group 2) The source of creation and re-creation

In Genesis and Ezekiel, we find that God's Spirit is instrumental in creation and in bringing dead things back to life.

Ask a group member or members to read the following passages:



The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Genesis 1.2

The Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

Genesis 2.7

It may not be immediately obvious that these verses have anything to do with God's Spirit, so we need to appreciate that the Hebrew word we translate as 'Spirit' also means 'wind' or 'breath'. These ideas are difficult to pin down. 'Spirit' or 'wind' can be so ephemeral that they are hardly perceptible or, at the other end of the scale, they can have tremendous force, reshaping the landscape. They also carry a connection to life, whether life in the body or life in creation itself.

'At its heart is the experience of a mysterious, awesome power.'

New Bible Dictionary (IVP, 1982), p. 1137

This same concurrence of meanings is to be found in Ezekiel 37, the famous passage about the valley of dry bones (parched skeletons). Here, however, it is not creation but recreation that is the outcome of the Spirit's activity. And it is not the bringing back to life of a single individual (as though God gave mouth-to-mouth resuscitation) but the restoration of the nation to its own land.



Ask a group member or members to read the following passage.

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones ... He said to me, 'Mortal, can these bones live?' I answered, 'O Lord God, you know.' Then he said to me, 'Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live ... Then he said to me, 'Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.' I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude ... You shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.

Ezekiel 37.1,3-5,9-10,13-14



Discuss the following questions:

- What do you think we can learn about God's Spirit from these passages?
- What might be lacking for us as Christians if we only had these passages to help us understand God's Spirit?
- What relationships can you see between these passages and Acts 2? What differences are there?

Group 3) The source of renewal and restoration



Ask a group member to read Isaiah 61.1-4 aloud from their own Bible.

In this passage, the presence of God's Spirit is associated with God's anointing someone to announce good news and restoration. These verses may be familiar to you, as Jesus quoted them in his sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4.18-19).

Then ask a group member to read the following verses from Ezekiel 36, where God says that he will enable Israel to fulfil his law because he will put his Spirit within them.

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

Ezekiel 36.25–28

Both these passages are about the renewal of God's covenant with his people after their return from exile – a new beginning with God. But they also have clear connections with the new covenant that Jesus instituted.

Discuss the following questions:



- What do you think we can learn about God's Spirit from these passages?
- What might be lacking for us as Christians if we only had these passages to help us understand God's Spirit?
- What relationships can you see between these passages and Acts 2? What differences are there?

SUMMARY

Unsurprisingly, as the Old Testament covers more than 1,000 years, there are various insights to be gleaned from it about God's Spirit.

- The Spirit expresses God's powerful activity among people.
- The Spirit enables people to act on behalf of God to accomplish his purposes, although this is often a temporary empowering rather than a permanent endowment.
- The Spirit is involved in creation as well as in bringing new life and restoration to people and nations.

The Old Testament looks forward to a time when God's Spirit will cleanse and restore his people, fulfilling his covenant with them.

Given the Spirit's involvement in these powerful actions in the Old Testament, it is appropriate that God's Spirit should play a leading role in empowering the New Testament church for its mission.

The Holy Spirit in the Bible is always the immanent power of the Living God, who through human agencies is shaping history to his own ends; and in the New Testament the Spirit is always the gift of Christ, whereby men [sic] are enabled to participate in his ministry and purpose.

GB Caird, *The Apostolic Age* (Duckworth, 1955), p. 57.

REFOCUS

Give thanks to God for anything that has interested you or helped you understand the Holy Spirit better in these Old Testament insights. Note it here:

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Is there anything you will do differently as a result of this study? Note it here:

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What new prayer requests do you have as a result of this study?

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