

God's Spirit: Definition

As God is a real, personal being who therefore has feelings and emotions, it is to be expected that He will have some way of sharing His desires and feelings with us, His children, and of acting in our lives in a way that will be consistent with His character. God does all of these things by His "spirit". If we wish to know God and have an active relationship with Him, we need to know what this "spirit of God" is, and how it operates.

It isn't easy to define exactly what the word "spirit" means. If you went to a wedding, for example, you might comment, "There was a really good spirit there!" By this you mean that the atmosphere was good, somehow everything about the wedding was good; everyone was smartly dressed, the food was nice, people spoke kindly to each other, the bride looked beautiful, etc. All those various things made up the "spirit" of the wedding. Likewise the spirit of God somehow summarizes everything about Him. The Hebrew word translated "spirit" in the Old Testament strictly means "breath" or "power"; thus God's spirit is His "breathing", the very essence of God, reflecting His mind. We will give examples of how the word "spirit" is used about someone's mind or disposition in Study 4.3 That the spirit does not just refer to the naked power of God is evident from Rom. 15:19: "the power of the spirit of God".

It is a common Bible teaching that how a man thinks is expressed in his actions (Prov. 23:7; Matt.12:34); a little reflection upon our own actions will confirm this. We think of something and then we do it. Our 'spirit' or mind may reflect upon the fact that we are hungry and desire food. We see a banana going spare in the kitchen; that desire of the 'spirit' is then translated into action - we reach out for the banana, peel it and eat. This simple example shows why the Hebrew word for 'spirit' means both the breath or mind, and also power. Our spirit, the essential us, refers to our thoughts and therefore also to the actions which we take to express those thoughts or disposition within us. On a far more glorious scale, God's spirit is the same; it is the power by which He displays His essential being, His disposition and purpose. God thinks and therefore does things: "As I have thought, so shall it come to pass; and as I have purposed, so shall it stand" (Is. 14:24).

The Power of God

Many passages clearly identify God's spirit with His power. In order to create the universe, "the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light" (Gen. 1:2,3).

God's spirit was the power by which all things, e.g. light, were made. "By His spirit He hath garnished the heavens; His hand hath formed the crooked serpent" (Job 26:13). "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth" (Ps. 33:6). God's spirit is therefore described as:-

His breath
His word
His hand.

It is therefore His power by which He achieves all things. Thus believers are born again by God's will (Jn. 1:13), which is by His spirit (Jn. 3:3-5). His will is put into operation by the spirit. Speaking of the entire natural creation, we read, "Thou sendest forth thy spirit, they are created: and (thereby) thou renewest the face of the earth" (Ps. 104:30). This spirit/power is also the sustainer of all things, as well as the means of their creation. It is easy to think that this tragic life stumbles on without this active input of God's spirit. Job, a man who became weary of this life, was reminded of this by another prophet: "If he (God) gather unto himself his spirit and his breath; all flesh shall perish together, and man shall turn again unto dust" (Job 34:14,15). When pulling out of a similar trough of depression, David asked God to continue to uphold him with this spirit, i.e. to preserve his life (Ps. 51:12).

We shall see in Study 4.3 that the spirit given to us and all creation is what sustains our life. We have "the breath of the spirit of life" within us (Gen. 7:22 A.V. mg.) given to us by God at birth (Ps. 104:30; Gen. 2:7). This makes Him "the God of the spirits of all flesh" (Num. 27:16 cp. Heb. 12:9). Because God is the life force which sustains all creation, His spirit is present everywhere. David recognized that through His spirit God was constantly present with him wherever he went, and through that spirit/power He was able to know every corner of David's mind and thinking. Thus God's spirit is the means by which He is present everywhere, although He personally is located in heaven.

"Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off...Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there... thy right hand (i.e. through the spirit) shall hold me" (Ps. 139:2,7,9,10).

A proper understanding of this subject reveals God to us as a powerful, active being. Many people have grown up with a vague 'belief' in God, but in reality 'God' is just a concept in their minds, a black box in part of the brain. An understanding of the true God and His very real presence all around us by His spirit can totally change our concept of life. We are surrounded by the spirit, constantly witnessing its actions, which reveal God to us. David found the encouragement of all this absolutely mind-blowing: "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it" (Ps. 139:6). Yet responsibilities come with such knowledge; we have to accept that our thinking and actions are totally open to God's view. As we examine our position before Him, especially when thinking about baptism, we need to bear this in mind. God's majestic words to Jeremiah apply to us, too: "Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? saith the Lord. Do not I fill (by the spirit) heaven and earth?" (Jer. 23:24).

The Holy Spirit

We have seen that God's spirit is a vast concept to grasp; it is His mind and disposition, and also the power by which He puts His thoughts into operation. "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he" (Pro. 23:7); and so God is His thoughts, in that sense He is His spirit (Jn. 4:24), although this does not mean that God is not personal (see Digression 1). To help us grapple with this vastness of God's spirit, we sometimes read of His "Holy Spirit".

The term "Holy Spirit" is to be found almost exclusively in the New Testament. In the A.V. the term "Holy Ghost" is often used, but it should always be translated as "Holy Spirit", as modern versions make clear. This is equivalent to the Old Testament phrases "the Spirit of God" or "the Spirit of the Lord". This is clear from passages such as Acts 2, which records the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles on the day of Pentecost. Peter explained that this was a fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel, in which it is described as the pouring out of "my (God's) Spirit" (Acts 2:17). Again, Lk.4:1 records that Jesus "being full of the Holy spirit" returned from Jordan; later in the same chapter Jesus speaks of this being a fulfilment of Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me". In both cases (and in many others) the Holy Spirit is equated with the Old Testament term "the Spirit of God".

Notice, too, how the Holy spirit is paralleled with the power of God in the following passages:

- "The Holy Ghost (Spirit) shall come upon thee (Mary), and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee" (Lk.1:35)
- "The power of the Holy Spirit...mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God" (Rom.15:13,19)
- "Our gospel (preaching) came...in power, and in the Holy Spirit" (1 Thess. 1:5).
- The promise of the Holy Spirit to the disciples was spoken of as their being "endued with power from on high" (Lk. 24:49).
- Jesus himself had been "anointed...with the Holy Spirit and with power" (Acts 10:38).
- Paul could back up his preaching with undeniable displays of God's power: "My speech and my preaching was...in demonstration of the spirit and of power" (1 Cor. 2:4).