

Who is the Spirit and what is he doing?

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[0 : 00] Good morning everyone, good to see you. Who is the Holy Spirit to you? Who is the Holy Spirit to you? At home we quite enjoy watching a game show. It's a British game show called Would I Lie to You? Anybody seen Would I Lie to You? A few, not many. Most of the people who are exposed to British culture and British humor would have seen it. It's a fascinating game show. Basically two teams compete against each other and they have to tell stories about themselves to the other team and the other team has to interrogate them and ask them questions to work out if the stories they're telling are true or not true or just made up. Some of them are true and some of them are not. The whole point is to work out the stories from the truth. Anyway, at one point in the show there's a mystery guest who comes on and this poor person, nobody knows from a bar of soap, comes on and stands there and just stands there silently. This person has a connection with one of the contestants on the team but you don't know who it is. You don't know who the connection is with and each of the contestants has to claim a different connection to this guest and the other team has to work out which connection it is. And the host asks each of the team members who is

Bob to you or who is Sally to you or whoever the mystery guest and then each of them has to answer and they each answer in a different way. One says, well this is my neighbor who I had to break into their house one day or this is my dentist who pulled out the wrong tooth one or this is my squash buddy or whatever it is. And they each have to defend their different stories and they're each trying to prove that their connection with this mystery guest is the legitimate one. Which is kind of like how Christians often talk about the Holy Spirit. You know what I mean? Each different church tradition, Christian tradition trying to prove that their connection and their understanding of who the Holy Spirit is, is the legitimate one. Who is the Holy Spirit to you? Well there's many different answers to that question from many different traditions and walks of life and understandings of what the Bible says about the Holy Spirit. Each wanting to show that their take on who the Holy Spirit is, is the legitimate one, is the right one. And there's a lot of confusion about the Holy Spirit, especially in today's world and in the church scene. I wonder what your understanding and your exposure to the idea of the Holy Spirit is.

Who is the Holy Spirit to you? That's a question I want you to think about this morning. Who is the Holy Spirit to you? And what part, if any, does he play in your life and in your daily affairs? I wonder.

Because I think most of us consider the Holy Spirit, when we have to think about the Holy Spirit, we consider the Holy Spirit as kind of like the silent partner in the Trinity. You know, we know the Father. We have a relationship with the Father if we're believers through Christ. And we know we worship the Father. We relate to the Father. We know the Son. We have Jesus' very words in the Bible. We know his works.

We know what he's done. We know the Son well. But the Holy Spirit, you know, who's he? Where does he fit in? He's always been there somewhere in the background, but we never quite know what he's been doing and what he's there for.

[3 : 22] I think that's typically the view most Christians have of the Holy Spirit. Well, the purpose of this sermon series over this term, the next month or so, is to correct that misunderstanding of the Holy Spirit.

And rather than to take a particular side in the various views of who the Holy Spirit is, what we're going to do over the next four or five weeks, we're going to mine Scripture.

And we're going to see what the Bible says and let the Bible inform our understanding of who the Holy Spirit is. And what he's doing in our world and in our churches and in our lives and in our communities.

So I hope you're ready to get on board with that task that we're going to set ourselves for the next month. Because what happens when we do that, when we open Scripture and we start to look for where the Holy Spirit is in Scripture and what Scripture teaches us about the Holy Spirit, what God wants us to know about his Holy Spirit, what we discover is that the Holy Spirit comes up in Scripture far more frequently than we expect.

Far from being somewhere in the background, he is actually involved in everything that is going on in God's plans for this world. In fact, not two sentences into the Bible we already meet the Holy Spirit.

[4 : 45] And then he also features in the very last chapter of the Bible and everywhere in between. But who is he and what is he doing all that time? Well, that's what I hope to answer this morning.

And to begin answering that question, the best place to start, of course, is at the beginning. And so that's what we're going to do. I invite you to turn in your Bibles to Genesis chapter 1.

And I don't even have to tell you what page that's on because you can work it out yourself. It's the second sentence of the Bible that I want us to read. Okay.

Genesis 1, the first page of the Bible, the second sentence says this. 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. And God said, let there be light. And there was light. Okay. Let's stop there. So what's the very first thing we learn about the Holy Spirit in the Bible on the first page?

[5 : 46] Well, we learn that the Holy Spirit was there at the beginning of creation, hovering. Hovering over the darkness and the chaos, getting ready to give it life.

Getting ready to carry out God's creative will in that darkness and chaos. The raw materials of creation. And so you've got this image almost of a director.

On a movie set, right? The director on a movie set is sitting in his director's chair. And all the actors and the stage crew and the cameramen are getting ready.

But they're all just waiting. Waiting for the director to say, lights, camera, action. And then suddenly it all springs into action. Well, that's kind of what was happening, we read, at the beginning of creation.

The Holy Spirit was ready before anything was made. The Holy Spirit was hovering over the darkness, waiting for the director's command for action.

[6 : 45] And then the Holy Spirit would spring into action. Because you see, it was the Holy Spirit whose job it was to inject the dark, dead stuff of the raw materials of creation with life.

With God's life. That was his role. That's what he was there to do. To carry out the director's command for action and inject the darkness and chaos with light and life.

And we know this because the original word for spirit is breath. Even the English word for spirit comes from the word breath.

But it's the same word that was used in the next chapter when God breathed into Adam's nostrils. Which is a weird thing.

But it's the same word, spirit. He inspirited him. He inspired him. In fact, that word inspire comes from the word spirit. And it's all rooted to the word breath.

[7 : 46] In fact, the Hebrew word, which is used here in Genesis, is ruach. Ruach. It's got this kind of vitality to it. Hebrew is really good in giving its words good sounds to represent what they mean.

But anyway, so when God made Adam, when God first made Adam, if you read in Genesis, he was just a lump of flesh. He was just meat. Right? He was just a hunk of meat. But what was it that transformed that hunk of meat into a living being?

It was God breathing spirit, ruach, into him. So that's what spirit means in the Bible. It's the thing that distinguishes life from death.

It's the thing that makes life go. That's what spirit is. I heard from another pastor. He was in the garden of their house with the three-year-old son.

And the son, as three-year-olds do, was staring at a slug. And he was just watching the slug. Just squelching along the ground. And then he turned to his dad and he said, Dad, what makes it go?

[8 : 52] And the dad looked at him and said, that's a profound question. What makes anything go? And what we discover here in Genesis, actually, it's God's spirit that makes all of life go.

Right? That's what the spirit does. Without God's spirit, this world would just be what it was before the spirit was hovering there. Just dead and chaotic, raw material with no life, no vitality, no ruach.

And so that's the first thing we discover about the Holy Spirit of God. His job since creation has been to bring life and vitality into what is dead and empty and dark and chaotic.

That is what the Holy Spirit does. That's his job description. So that's the first thing we discover. But we also, as we read on in the Bible, especially in the New Testament, what we discover about the Holy Spirit is that he's not just a force that's hovering around.

Like, you know, in Star Wars, you've got the force. But the Holy Spirit is a person. He, in fact, is a person in the Trinity. One with the Father, just like Jesus is one with the Father.

[9 : 59] Just like Jesus is God and the Father is God, the Holy Spirit is just as much God as the other two members of the Trinity. And so not only is he a life-giving power behind creation, but he is God himself.

So basically, if you take that together, you can understand it like this. The Holy Spirit, and if you're writing notes, this is a good definition for the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is God's particular invisible presence that gives life and energy to the things in the visible world. Say it again. The Holy Spirit is God's particular invisible presence that gives life and energy to the things in the visible world.

Because all of this stuff we see in the world has a power station behind it that is making it go.

We don't see what is behind it, but the Bible tells us it is God's Spirit. Okay. So then we are in Genesis. What happened after creation?

[11 : 06] After the Spirit came and injected life and vitality into creation? After the initial creation, it didn't take long. In fact, it only took two chapters for man to mess it up.

And for humans to start questioning God's authority over them and wondering if they could live and conduct life and run the world without God.

And that's the natural instinct we all have as sinners, to think we can go it alone. And so they broke God's law. We read in Genesis 3, they stepped out from under his authority. They wanted to go it alone.

But what they didn't realize is when they did that, when they stepped out from under God's authority, they also unwittingly stepped out from his presence and the influence of his Spirit.

And what happened then? If we trace in the Bible from that point, when they stepped away from the influence of God's Spirit, what happened then? Well, we read from Genesis 4 onwards, don't we?

- [12 : 08] The disorder and the darkness that existed before creation came back into creation through sin and death. So you've got the Spirit who was hovering over the disorder and the chaos and the darkness before he injected it with life.

And now people have walked away from that. And all of that disorder and darkness and chaos comes back into creation in the form of sin. And so people were cut off from the life that God intended them to have through his Spirit.

And so not only could they, we read on, could they not experience life to the full, it was frustrated. The curse, we see in the curse in Genesis 3, God frustrated work.

God frustrated family, childbearing, marriage, all of those things. Well, it wasn't so much God, but it was sin that frustrated those things. So life, you can't live it to the full abundantly like God intended through his Spirit when we've been cut off from the Spirit.

But also, life now has an expiry date because it's no longer energized by God's Spirit. And so even if you do manage to have a pretty decent life on earth, it's just temporary.

- [13 : 19] It's going to end. It's like when you unplug your laptop or your phone from the charging cable. It'll carry on working for a while, won't it?

Because it's on battery. But that battery is limited. You know it. And right from the moment you unplug it, it starts to tick down in the bottom right hand of your screen. It starts to tell you the battery is running out. When it's plugged into the mains, it's got no problem.

It's happy. It's got that little, you know, electric plug signal. And it's hunky-dory. It can stay on forever like that. But when it's unplugged, eventually it's going to die.

It's only a matter of time. And in some laptops, you can actually see the moment you unplug it, the screen goes dim. As if to say, listen, I'm not as vital as I used to be if I'm not plugged into the mains.

It's not as bright, right, as when it was plugged in. Well, you see, that in a way is what happened to humanity when we removed ourselves from God's Spirit. We disconnected from the mains. We became dim and our lives became temporary and passing away.

- [14 : 20] So every time you unplug your laptop, you can remember that illustration. That's what happened in Genesis chapter 3 when we disconnected from the influence of God's life-giving Spirit.

The question, of course, is, well, why did God give us a battery at all? Why did we carry on living for a while at all? Why do we have a lifespan on earth if we're disconnected from God's Spirit? Well, the answer is, thankfully, that God wasn't finished with us.

Because then if He was, the Bible would literally end at Genesis 4. He wasn't. God had a plan. You see, God created this world as a place for His Spirit to give us life.

And a place for us to live, not to die, not to suffer, not to have the kind of lives people have in this world today. God created this world as a place for us to live and enjoy abundant life through His Spirit who energizes us in a beautiful, ordered and good creation.

The way God intended it to be. That was what God intended. And you know what? But He's not going to let some human fools mess that up. No matter how sinful we were. And so, the story of the Bible, from that point on, is all about God's plan to send His Spirit back to us.

- [15 : 40] That's how you can see the whole story of Scripture. Us disconnecting from God's Spirit. And from that moment, God planning to send His Spirit back to us.

To give us life again. Back into the darkness and the chaos that we've created. To hover over and inject new life, just like He did at creation.

And so, even in the history of Israel in the Old Testament, and despite all of their sin, which was numerous, God already graciously starts to reveal to them, through His prophets, a plan for the return of His Holy Spirit one day.

To give us new life. For example, and there's a number of them, but the passage Paul read for us earlier, Ezekiel 36. I'll read it again. God says this. In other words, what God is saying to His people, through the prophets, is that I'm going to reconnect you to the mains again.

You're unplugged, you're dying, you're dim, but I'm going to reconnect you to the mains. I'm going to send my Spirit again. And then we read on in Scripture, and we start to see how God plans to do that.

[17 : 10] Because alongside all of these promises of the Spirit coming back, we also read prophecies about a person that God is planning to send into this world called the Messiah. Messiah, who's going to come to this world. But listen to how the Messiah is described, for example, in Isaiah chapter 11.

And you probably won't miss the reference here. This is Isaiah 11 verse 2. And the Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him. And the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

You see, when the prophets spoke about the coming of this Messiah, they spoke about Him bringing the Spirit with Him. God's Spirit, God's Holy Spirit, from heaven to earth.

And so it's no surprise that when Jesus, who turns out to be this Messiah, arrives, all four of the Gospels make a point of mentioning something that happened at the beginning of His ministry.

[18 : 11] Now, the Gospels don't often all mention the same thing. Some of them, two or three of the Gospels will mention one event. But there's not a whole lot of overlap. They're all looking at Jesus' life and ministry from different perspectives.

However, there's one thing, one thing that they all mention because it's that important. And we find it right at the beginning of each of the Gospels. I'll read Mark's account. Mark 1 from verse 9.

At that time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, He saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on Him like a dove.

And a voice came from heaven, You are my Son, whom I love. With you I am well pleased. At once, the Spirit sent Him out into the wilderness, which is the same root word as what was going on in creation.

The chaos, the darkness. The Spirit is now hovering back, going straight to where evil is. Where darkness and chaos and the source of it is. He sent Him out into the wilderness and He was in the wilderness, 40 days being tempted by Satan.

[19 : 21] And so the Spirit accompanied Jesus as He began His ministry. And from the moment the Spirit arrived, the very next sentence is going straight to the source of the world's problems.

There in the chaos, in the wilderness, to confront the darkness. So we see right away what the Spirit's agenda is. The Holy Spirit of God, the moment He arrives on earth, is to undo the darkness and the chaos and bring life into the world again.

Because that is His job and it always has been. And then, even when Jesus Himself kicked off His public ministry, listen to what He declared in His home synagogue in Luke chapter 4.

And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. Unrolling it, He found the place where it is written, The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Then He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down.

[20 : 23] The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on Him. He began by saying to them, Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. It's an epic moment.

When Jesus basically says, I am what this prophecy was talking about. He is stating there that He came, He has come to earth in the power of the Spirit to begin God's restoration plan for the world, to bring light into darkness again.

And then, what He does immediately is He goes out and He demonstrates that with miracles, which all in some way point to that restored creation that the Spirit is coming to bring.

Because in His miracles, He brings order out of chaos. He brings healing to sickness. He brings calm to a storm on the Sea of Galilee.

You see, that's not the first time in the Bible that there's chaos over the waters. It's Genesis 1, isn't it? And it's a chaos which is undone by the power of God's Spirit in this world.

[21 : 32] And so, you see, the coming of Jesus, which we know a lot about and we talk a lot about, because it's what saved us from our sins. If He didn't come and die on the cross for our sins and take those sins on Himself, then we would have no hope.

And we know a lot about the coming of Jesus to this world. We celebrate it, Easter, Christmas. But what we, I think, sometimes forget is that the coming of Jesus into this world is also the return of the Holy Spirit into this world, into this chaos, into this darkness, to come and do what He originally did in creation, to give it life and order and goodness again.

But you see, something needed to happen before that prophecy could be fulfilled, before He could do that, before He could come and give life and order and goodness into lives and families and societies, something needed to happen first.

The sin that separated us from Him back in Eden needed to be dealt with. And that's why when Jesus came, He didn't just come to bring the Spirit to earth again, but from the moment He started His ministry, He set His face to and headed towards Jerusalem to die on the cross.

To die for our sins in our place, to wash us clean, to earn justification for us.

[23 : 01] Why? Why did He do that for us? Just so that we could go to heaven one day? No. Jesus did that for you and me, if we're believers, to prepare us for His Holy Spirit to come and work in us and through us in this life.

He died for you and me to make us fit to receive His Holy Spirit. That's the reason He came to die. You see, the gospel, the forgiveness of sins, what we sing about, what we talk about as Christians, that's not primarily just about going to heaven when you die.

Sadly, often many Christians see it like that, some cosmic insurance policy. I believe in Jesus, I go to church, I say the right things, I believe the right things and therefore I'm sorted. I've got my insurance policy and for eternity, I know where I'm going when I die so I can just sit back and enjoy the ride.

No, that's not why Jesus died. That's not what He came for. Here's a newsflash. He didn't come for you. He came to fulfill His Father's plan for this creation.

You just got caught up in that, if you're a believer. The reason Jesus died for your sins is that He wanted a base for His Holy Spirit to work to restore this creation.

[24 : 18] And He chose you and me to be part of that. Thanks be to God. We've been caught up. If we're believers, if you're a believer today in Jesus, that belief has been given to you as a gift and it means that you've been caught up in God's restoration program for this world.

He has chosen you to be washed clean of your sins, to be a vessel for His Holy Spirit to come down and fill you and work in this world. And so Jesus died and then He rose again because He had God's Spirit.

He was plugged into the mains. And if you're plugged into the mains like He was, you just can't stay dead for any length of time. Right? So He rose again. But then after He did all that, there was one more thing that was left for Him to do.

And that was to give God's Spirit that He had to us, to His people, to His disciples. To pour out His Spirit on people like the prophets foretold, which is exactly what He did.

In a spectacular way, just so we don't miss it. It doesn't always happen in this way, but the first time it did, the first time He poured out His Spirit, He did it in such a spectacular way that you couldn't miss it.

[25 : 31] It was there at Pentecost, Acts chapter 2, that Gene read for us. When His disciples were gathering to pray, He poured out His Spirit for them. Visually. Even though the Spirit is normally invisible, He made the Spirit visible through this picture of tongues of fire.

It must have been insane to be there and to see that. But what was happening there, He was giving them the Holy Spirit's light and life that He brought to the original darkness and chaos of creation.

He was giving again through His people. And so He was plugging them into the mains again. To energize them for new life and to equip them to be the start of God's restored creation, which began that day.

And then, since then, everyone, the Bible teaches us that everyone who believes in Jesus and is called to faith and a place in His family, through faith in Christ, not through what we've done, because we are terrible, we are sinners, we cannot earn salvation.

It's through what Jesus did for us. It's totally Him. And through faith alone, in just believing that, we are saved, we are members of the family.

[26 : 46] Don't ever forget that. When you're feeling that you're caught up in your own sin and you're feeling unworthy of God, don't forget that that doesn't matter, because Jesus is worthy of God and you have His righteousness if you're a believer.

And since Pentecost, everyone who puts their faith in Jesus and is baptized into His people is also baptized with His Spirit.

That's what water baptism, it's part of what it represents. Baptism with God's Spirit, pouring out of God's Spirit that He promised us in the prophets. And this baptism of the Spirit happens to every believer.

It's not a separate event like some people say. Jesus says in John 3, whoever hasn't been given the Spirit is not yet saved. You can't be saved and not have the Spirit.

To be saved is to have the Spirit. And so every true believer has been given God's Holy Spirit. They've been plugged into the mains again. And what the Spirit then does in the life of every true believer is the very same work He did in Eden in creation.

[27 : 53] He brings light and life into the darkness and the chaos. Into your darkness and your chaos and your confusion. The Holy Spirit injects light and order and life.

He brings God's life-giving presence into this world by giving us God's desires and equipping us and energizing us for God's work here.

That's what He's doing now. That's what He's busy with. And it's because of that the Holy Spirit is described in Scripture as a down payment or guarantee of what is to come.

As well as in other passages, a first fruits of the new creation. It's an agricultural metaphor. It's when before the full crop came, you started to have these first fruits to anticipate the crop coming.

Well, that's what the Holy Spirit in the life of believers is doing in this world. So, listen to Romans 8. For example, the words will be up on the screen behind me. Romans 8 from verse 22.

[29 : 01] We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up until the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the Spirit.

We groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. It's interesting. What Paul's saying there is that one of the signs of the Holy Spirit dwelling in a person is that you will not be satisfied with this world anymore.

We groan inwardly waiting for our adoption to sonship, waiting for the restored creation. Because why? Because we've already started to taste it. As the Spirit works to restore our lives, we get a taste of the restored world to come.

You see, the restored world, we don't see it yet. This world is still broken, but we see it in the lives of Christians, as Christians, as believers are restored, as their desires are restored, as they learn to love, as they learn to be merciful, as they learn to reflect God to the people around them.

We taste what's to come. That's what it means by having a guarantee and the first fruits of the new creation. In our desires, in our unity that God has given us, and a whole lot more that the Holy Spirit does in our lives, which we don't have time to go into this morning, but we will.

[30 : 28] In all of those things that the Holy Spirit does, we actually start to experience flashes of new creation life to show the world around us what the restored creation is like, even while we struggle in this old life with its sickness and its trials and its diseases and its just, its horribleness.

It's as we go through that and the Holy Spirit shines out all the more in the darkness and we see and we exhibit the first fruits of the new creation because we're no longer dimmed.

We're plugged into the mains if we're believers. And the world should see that. We should be showing the world what new creation life looks like in acts of mercy and love.

And in that way, when the Holy Spirit does that and as He works in believers and transforms us and He works in church communities like St. Mark's and He works in different church communities around the world, what the Holy Spirit is doing is He is again hovering over the darkness like He was at creation.

But He's doing that through you and me. He's doing that through the church. He's hovering over the dark places of this world through His church to bring light and life into the darkness and the chaos.

[31 : 54] That is what the Holy Spirit is doing today. And that is what we're doing here in Plumstead. And so we're told in Scripture now to get on board with that.

To stop messing around. Stop wasting our life. And get on board with what the Holy Spirit is doing. It is the most exciting and epic work that we could ever do in this world.

To get on board with God's cosmic restoration project. Not for our own sake. Primarily. But because this world desperately needs the Holy Spirit to give it a life again.

And He's going to do that through us and no one else. And so we better get with the program. Because this fallen world, this community, Plumstead, Southfield, and surrounds is depending on us to get on board with God's restoration program for the world.

Even if they don't know it. They need us to. And so over the next month we're going to be seeing how to do that. How specifically to get on board with what the Holy Spirit is doing in our world and in our communities and in the lives of the people around us.

[33 : 05] And I hope you will come back. But for now, all I want to ask you as we finish is whether you want to be part of that restoration project. Do you actually want to be part of it?

Because you've got to want to be part of it. And if you don't want to be part of it, then there's really no point in you coming for the next four weeks. Ask yourself, are you ready to sign up for God's great restoration program for this world?

Are you ready to be part of it in your workplace, in your school, in your community groups, wherever you are present out there, wherever you live life out there, are you willing to present yourself as a volunteer to be used by God's Spirit so that He can bring light and life into those places?

Because that is why He's placed you there. He just wants you to step up now and say, I'm ready. I'm ready. How do I? Help me. Help me to be used by your Spirit.

Because that's why Jesus died to save you. So that He could fill you with His Spirit to do His life-giving work through you. And so are you ready to be part of it? And are you going to come back next week to find out how?

[34 : 14] Let's pray and ask for God's help. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word that exposes to us the invisible things of this universe. And more than that, it shows us, it reveals to us Your amazing restoration plan for this world that we messed up, that we undid at creation, that You haven't abandoned us, You haven't given up on us, You haven't given up on this world.

We thank You for that. And we thank You that You have a plan and that You've sent Your Spirit to change things, to restore this world back to what it should be. And Lord, thank You for the reminder that You've chosen to do that through us.

And so we pray, Lord, would You help us, even this week, to be willing to get on board with what You are doing in this world, to open our Bibles, to engage in prayer, to engage in the spiritual battles that You've called us to.

And would You bring us back safely next week and the weeks to come so that we can see more of what Your Word says about how to equip us for this great task. Thank You, Lord.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.