

# Understanding the Bible #10 – Spirit

Based on *The Bible: A Story That Makes Sense of Life* by Andrew Ollerton

## Bible Reading

*In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.*

*After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.*

*On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.”*

*Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”*

*He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

Acts 1:1-8

## Recap

So, for those of you who have been following this series, we’ve come a long way.

We’ve looked at how the Bible teaches us about how God created the universe, and within that the planet we live on, and... humans, us, in his image, to live in relationship with him. And how humans disobeyed God, damaging their relationship with him.

And we looked at how God chooses a group of humans to be his ambassadors on earth (Israel) and how he rescues them from slavery

and gives them a land of their own. And how this is a regular theme in the Bible, God releasing us from captivity, ultimately realised in Jesus releasing humanity from the captivity of sin.

The we came to the theme of Exile, how God judged his people for not keeping to the terms of the agreement they had made with him by allowing them to be conquered by foreign nations and taken away, exiled, from the land he had given them. We saw how this is a Bible theme, and how so many people today live in a situation where they experience exile, whether that be that they are physically removed from their homeland, and/or the realisation that they don't seem to 'belong' in this world.

And then we looked at the idea of Messiah, how following Israel's return from exile, how they had longed for someone who would restore their fortunes and make them a great nation again. How God, through the prophets, gave promises that he would one day provide a solution to mankind's rebellion against him, which was marvellously fulfilled in Jesus's life, death and resurrection.

Which brings us to the next part of the Bible's story, 'Spirit'.

In the Bible reading we heard about how Jesus, after his resurrection and before his ascension, talks with his disciples, telling them to wait in Jerusalem, and promising them that they will be sent the gift of the Holy Spirit. In the Bible, the Holy Spirit is associated with God's blessing and power, and not surprisingly the disciples take this to mean that this is going to be when Jesus takes up his messianic kingship, kicking out the Romans and making Israel great again.

Jesus, again, tells them that the date of the final restoration of the world is not something that they will be given. But they will receive power to be Jesus' ambassadors, proclaiming the good news of how humans can be reconciled with God to Jerusalem and beyond.

And with that, Jesus disappears into the clouds.

The disciples, by now getting used to expecting the unexpected, return to the room they're staying at in Jerusalem and carry on their lives with the small community of people who believed Jesus's message. I'm sure that a lot of the conversations would have revolved around remembering the things Jesus did and said while he was on earth, and wondering what was going to happen next.

And, a week and a half later, they found out. Chapter 2 of the Book of Acts tells us that on the day of Pentecost, a Jewish festival that celebrates the beginning of harvest time and the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai (10 commandments, etc, bonus points who are already seeing the significance of this) the Jesus believers were gathered together in Jerusalem.

*Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.*

Acts 2:2-4

These verses are filled with meaning. The word used for 'wind' is the same word used in Genesis for the spirit or breath of God that he breathed into humans to give them life. This is the fulfilment of Jesus's promise before he left earth, the promise that they would receive power from God to be his ambassadors to the world.

And the tongues of fire represent God's presence. Like the burning bush that Moses encountered. Or the fire that Elisha called down on Mount Carmel. And even more significantly, during the giving of the law at Mount Sinai where the mountain was covered in smoke because the LORD descended on it in fire. And this fiery presence separates out and comes to rest on each believer. Jesus' promised power is for every person who puts their trust in him.

Peter realises that this is a fulfilment of the prophet Joel's words, and he stands up and speaks to the crowd that has gathered to gawk at this astonishing event, starting with Joel 2:17

*“In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.”*

Peter, no doubt inspired, informed and empowered by the Holy Spirit he has just received, goes on to preach the sermon of his life. Three thousand people accept his invitation to repent of their sins and follow Jesus. Three thousand people received the gift of the Holy Spirit, and went through the waters of baptism. The Christian Church that we are a part of was born.

After being baptised, the new converts get stuck into learning what it means to be a follower of Jesus... Acts 2:42-47 reads...

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

Acts 2:42-47

The first Christian community then enters into a 'honeymoon time' learning more about what it means to be a follower of Jesus, learning more about one another, and worshipping the God who has so marvellously transformed their lives. Meanwhile, God is working supernaturally through the apostles to further the message they are proclaiming.

And the new believers help one another, and meet in the temple courts. But their faith is not restricted to the temple, they practise

their faith in their homes as well. And this kind of faith is contagious, people see the change in them, ask more about it, and some of them become believers as well.

However, as the Church grows in numbers, the Jewish authorities get uneasy about the popularity of this new sect and have two of its leaders, Peter and John, arrested.

After interrogating them, the Jewish leaders are not sure what to do, they are not doing anything illegal, and the general public were loving the miracles God was doing through them. So they let them go. And when they report what has happened to the Christian community, they pray to God that they may continue to share the good news, and that God would continue to perform signs and wonders through the name of Jesus.

And that is what they do, even when it leads to them being arrested again, and this time getting physically punished by the Jewish authorities. Their response?

*The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.*

Acts 5:41-42

And yet at the beginning of chapter 5 there is a report of a husband and wife being financially dishonest. And in chapter 6 believers begin to complain about about how food was being unfairly distributed.

The early Christians were sinful humans just like you and me, and the Bible doesn't try to cover this up. Much of the New Testament is written to address the problems that Christians were facing, and often, creating. Where there are people, there will be problems.

And yet, despite this, God was (and still is) creating a new community of people, a people who respond to Jesus's message of repentance and

salvation and receive the gift of his Holy Spirit, empowering them to life in relationship with God and with one another.

In chapter 7 one of the new believers, Stephen is arrested. He gives a powerful speech that enrages the authorities so much that they stone him to death, and begin attacking the Christian community.

Many Christians fled from Jerusalem, and as Acts 8:4 reads...

*Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.*

Acts 8:4

In trying to destroy Christianity, the Jewish authorities unwittingly started its mission to the rest of the world.

And, from the beginning, the message of Jesus was for everyone. A believer called Philip travelled to Samaria, an area out of bounds to most Jews. He preaches the message of Jesus and huge numbers of Samaritans respond and are filled with the Holy Spirit. He later shares the gospel with a black Ethiopian eunuch, who believes the message and is immediately baptised.

Peter gets told by God in the most dramatic fashion that the Jewish kosher food laws no longer apply, Jesus has ushered in a new era where there was no superior Jew and inferior Gentile, no inferior slave and superior free, no superior male and inferior female.

2,000 years on, Christianity is an international religion. In its early days it spread incredibly quickly across North Africa, then to Europe and the West. The centre of global Christianity is now Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. Many sociologists predict that by 2030 the largest Christian population will be in China.

The Bible has been translated into nearly 3,000 languages, and there are over 2 billion people who identify as Christian. With all its many problems, the community that began in Jerusalem has come a long

way, and shows no signs of disappearing any time soon as God through his Holy Spirit continues his work.

But let's go back 2,000 years and have a look at how the Holy Spirit transformed the most unlikely convert to Christianity into one of its greatest missionaries.

Saul was a Jew raised in Tarsus, a coastal city in what is now called Turkey. He was educated by a famous rabbi called Gamaliel, but he was also a Roman citizen.

As we've already seen, Christianity was not greeted with delight by the majority of the Jewish authorities. And Saul was particularly outraged by this new sect, making it his personal mission to see them wiped off the face of the earth.

When Stephen was stoned to death, Saul was there, looking after the coats of the men who were throwing rocks at Stephen's head.

Saul hated Christians because the things they believed flew in the face of so many things he believed to be true. Christians believed that Jesus was the incarnation of the Jewish God, and that his crucifixion was fulfilling the words of the Jewish prophets. This would have sounded like blasphemy to an orthodox Jew of the time. And you didn't get more orthodox than Saul.

Not long after the stoning of Stephen, Saul got permission from the Jerusalem high priest to take a few heavies to Damascus, arrest Christian converts and return them to Jerusalem. And this is where things get interesting...

*As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"*

*"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.*

*"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.*

Acts 9:3-5

Saul immediately realises this is a supernatural event, like the burning bush and Moses story that he had read in the scriptures.

No doubt confused by the question, Saul asks who this is, expecting no doubt to hear that it is an angel. The answer is significant, it's not an angel, but Jesus, and he wants to know why Saul is persecuting him.

Of course, Saul doesn't think he is persecuting Jesus, he thinks Jesus is dead. But Jesus identifies so completely with the new community of believers that when Saul hurts them, he hurts Jesus. That's why the Church came to be known as the body of Christ.

We are not told whether Saul answers, only that he is blinded, and told to travel to Damascus and await further instructions. He obeys, and thereby begins one of the most significant conversions to the Christian faith.

Over the next two decades Saul (he changed his name to the Roman version Paul, probably because his main work was with non-Jews) poured himself into preaching the good news of Jesus across what is now Turkey, Greece and Italy.

Despite immense opposition Paul, with the help of a dedicated team of Spirit-empowered fellow believers, saw the Christian Church spread and grow from Jerusalem to the rest of the world.

And as the message of Jesus spread, a new way of living began to emerge. Christianity did not appear out of nothing. It is the fulfilment of thousands of years of God interacting with people and nations. What we now know as the Old Testament records this, and the early Christians read it in the light of the words and actions of Jesus.

The world Paul lived in was very different from the one that you and I experience. Our society is not perfect. There is unfairness, inequality, crime and poverty, but 1st century Roman society was on another level, with a tiny number of rich and powerful living in comparative



luxury (although even they would have envied our fridge/freezers and cars), with the vast majority living at a much lower level.

Up to half the population were slaves, who had no rights at all, their owners were free to abuse or even kill them without any legal repercussions. Women and children weren't much better off, especially if they were poor.

Paul was a brilliant man, and as he studied the scriptures in the (blindingly bright) light of his conversion experience and his belief in Jesus as God's promised Messiah, he realised that Jesus' message fulfilled the scriptures he had studied since a young man, enriching and explaining the laws and events within them.

Paul never forgot his conversion experience, it reinforced to him that salvation is not something we earn. Jesus had reached out and saved him while he was on his way to persecute Jesus' followers. Salvation is a gift from God the Father to us, purchased by the God-man Jesus, and made real in us by God the Holy Spirit.

Some of Paul's most powerful writing comes when he realises that some Christians are forgetting this and going back to trying to earn their salvation. The book of Galatians is one long rant at people like this, and in the middle of it he writes:

*So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

Galatians 3:26-28

We have no idea how shocking these words would have been when they were first read. This kind of equality was a direct challenge to the authority of the Roman Empire. Christians had a new king, Jesus. We are wrapped up in him, each one of us equally loved, equally special, equally important to God.

The authorities quickly realised this, it is one of the reasons why Paul's message sparked riots and caused him to spend many years under house arrest. And over the 2,000 years since the Christian faith was born, believers have regularly been persecuted for practising this new way of being human.

The early Christian communities were not perfect. And institutions like slavery took thousands of years to be properly challenged, and sadly still exist in many places today.

But Jesus's teachings, his sin-conquering death and the gift of the empowering Holy Spirit meant that Christians have consistently made a positive difference in this world, creating schools and hospitals, feeding the poor and freeing slaves. And if you are a Christian, you are called to be a positive change-maker, demonstrating Jesus's new way of being human in everything you do, from treating everyone as an equal, showing practical love wherever you can, and most importantly asking God the Holy Spirit for opportunities to share the good news of Jesus, as Peter wrote:

*...in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.*

1 Peter 3:15-16

The book of Acts ends abruptly with Paul on death row in Rome. What is he doing? Sharing the gospel with his guards, and anyone else who would listen. Most stories would tell us what happened next. Would Paul be miraculously freed? Or would he die a martyr's death?

We don't know... and like the ending of the Gospel of Mark, we are left realising the story must be continued, and that we are part of that continuation... part of the same Jesus-inspired, Spirit-empowered Church that Paul was helping to create.

And remember that when Paul writes his letters, he was almost always addressing a community, not an individual. The English word 'you' is ambiguous, it can be either singular or plural. And because we belong to a culture that is so focussed on the individual, we tend to read the word 'you' as meaning 'me', rather than 'we'.

When Paul says, in Ephesians 5:8,

*For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light.*

Ephesians 5:8

he is telling the Ephesians that the Church is a community. And it is a community where we don't get to choose its members, God does. And that's not easy for an individualist like me, but it is a lesson that I have had to learn and re-learn. It is something I have had to continually ask God for help with, and it is a prayer that God loves to answer.

Where we are willing, God the Holy Spirit will empower us to work together. It will be messy and complicated, but it is the way God has chosen to get things done in this world. As the African proverb goes...

*If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.*

When I read books on the history of the Church I am always struck by how ordinary people who have become followers of Jesus, work together to do such extraordinary things.

In the first and second century unwanted babies were often left out in the open to die. The early Christians realised that Jesus's teaching meant that every human life was precious, and so they began adopting these abandoned babies into their families. Ordinary people doing extraordinary, culture-challenging things.

Long before vaccines were available, when deadly viruses infected cities most people fled for the comparative safety of the countryside. But Christian churches were known for remaining in the cities to care

for the sick and dying, even though many of them died as a result. These Christians realised their lives were part of a bigger picture. That for them death was not the end. That faithfulness to Jesus was more important than their personal comfort.

In 362, Julian the Apostate, the last pagan emperor of the Roman Empire, wrote in a letter to a priest in Asia Minor that as famine had struck the region, corn should be distributed to the most vulnerable.

Julian detested the Christian religion, and yet he adds:

*'It is a shame that, when no Jew ever has to beg and the impious Christians support not only their own poor but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us.'*

As Christians we are part of a huge story that stretches back to the beginning of time itself. This series has attempted to give us some perspective on that story, how God has worked in history to bring humans into relationship with him, a relationship that will ultimately transcend time and history.

There is a danger that this can make us feel insignificant. We live in a culture that makes the individual the centre of reality and life a series of temporary achievements and experiences. We want to feel important, 'seen'.

The message of the Bible is that we are important, and we are 'seen', by a loving, all-powerful Father God who created us and sustains us. More importantly we are known and loved by him. Jesus has provided a way for us to enjoy a relationship with him, and the Holy Spirit empowers us to live a life that has real purpose.

The knowledge that we are not as important as we like to think is helpful, it removes the pressure to 'perform', the fear that it all depends on us. The knowledge that we are known and loved by God gives us the security to take risks, knowing that he will be there for us

if we fail. I can testify to that. I have failed a lot. And when I have turned to him, he has always been there for me.

With Jesus there is always hope. And hope is the subject we will be looking at in the next and concluding talk of this series.