

The Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts

Welcome to Part 5 of our study of the Holy Spirit. This time our focus is upon the role and function of the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts.

I remember reading the Book of Acts for the first time. I had a handbook to the Bible that I used to give me an overview of each book of the Bible before I read it, and for Acts it stated that although the book was often referred to as the Acts of the Apostles, in reality it should be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. I've always held onto that. For without the presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of these obedient apostles, there would have been no miracles, no conversions, no impacting sermons, no jail breaks, no moments of divine revelation, no church growth, no unity amongst the church leaders and most of all, no Day of Pentecost.

Pentecost was the defining moment of the New Testament church and without it there would be no Book of Acts in the Bible at all. The Book of Acts charts the fulfilment of Jesus words to his disciples in Acts 1:8 where he says:

Acts 1:8

....and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

What a promise that is! How could Jesus be so sure that fallible men could carry out such an incredible calling? Well it's all about what he prefaced that statement with – let's read the whole of the verse this time.

Acts 1:8

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.

Luke records these as the last words of Jesus before he was taken up in the cloud out of the disciples' sight.

Let me paraphrase these last words of Jesus for you:

When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, there'll be no stopping what God's going to do through you.

Is that an experience worth waiting for? Let's make the decision in our hearts tonight that we're going to be the ones to press in and receive what they received and see God do the exploits through us that he did through them.

Well it's got exciting already hasn't it...and we've only got to verse 8 within the Book of Acts....we've another 999 verses to go tonight to get to the end of it! I looked that up on line on a website that commented that only one person had found it useful. A kindred spirit of mine no doubt!

Jesus had instructed his disciples regarding receiving the Holy Spirit in the following way:

Acts 1:3-5

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 baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit."

One of the key words in that passage is 'wait'. Often as Christians when we reach a moment of enthusiasm and zeal, we want to do something for God. I'm sure that these disciples were zealous too. But Jesus knew that they had to be equipped first with the Holy Spirit. You see it would have been like sending troops into a war zone without any equipment. The Holy Spirit equips us. He empowers us, guides us, provides us with wisdom, knowledge, a surplus of joy, peace, patience....I would love to go on but we need to hold some of this back for a later study. Without the Holy Spirit in our lives we can't give convincing proofs that Jesus is alive! And to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit Jesus told them to wait.

Waiting on God is a key part of the calling of the Christian. Who did God call to lead Israel into the Promised Land? Joshua. What were Joshua's credentials and qualifications? He'd been equipped. How and where had he been equipped? He never left the Tent of Meeting.

Exodus 33:7-11

Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp some distance away, calling it the "tent of meeting." Anyone inquiring of the Lord would go to the tent of meeting outside the camp. And whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people rose and stood at the entrances to their tents, watching Moses until he entered the tent. As Moses went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance, while the Lord spoke with Moses. Whenever the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance to the tent, they all stood and worshipped, each at the entrance to their tent. The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Then Moses would return to the camp, but his young aide Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent.

If we want to do exploits for God, we need to realise one thing above all: God is our source. That means we need intimacy with Him and this comes with spending time with Him. Make room for more of God in your life. However much room you're giving Him at the moment, give Him more. Wait on Him.

Luke 24:29 [Jesus is speaking to His disciples]

"....I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

Wait. Stay.

I'm sure you've witnessed a pet dog before being trained by its owner. The dog is full of excitement for the treat in his master's hand, but as the master walks ahead he gives the command to the dog to stay for a while. This is hard for the dog who loves his master and sees what is in his master's hand. But the master knows that he must first teach him obedience, and so he commands him to stay. Then he will receive what he has for him.

I love the description of being clothed with power from on high. When Adam and Eve fell in the Garden of Eden the Bible says that their eyes were opened and they realised that they were naked. Yet they weren't physically clothed before the Fall. The nakedness that they were experiencing was far more than just an absence of clothes. It was an absence of the presence of God upon them. Jesus came to undo every effect of the Fall and filling believers with the Holy Spirit is a significant part of that restoration.

Are you excited? The good news today is that the Holy Spirit is freely available to all believers.

Now Luke tells us that the apostles were all together in one room when the Holy Spirit came down upon them in power.

Acts 2:1-4

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 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.

I am struck by the image of the tongues of fire separating and coming upon each of them. In the second study in this series we looked at the Holy Spirit coming upon the 70 elders that were to assist Moses leading the people of Israel in the wilderness.

Numbers 11:16,17

The Lord said to Moses: "Bring me seventy of Israel's elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the tent of meeting, that they may stand there with you. I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take some of the power of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them. They will share the burden of the people with you so that you will not have to carry it alone.

Numbers 11:25

Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke with him [Moses], and he took some of the power of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied....

Do you think God diluted the power of the Holy Spirit upon Moses that day by taking some of the anointing upon him and giving it to the seventy elders? Do you think that the elders received only a portion of God's presence that day? I believe there is a wonderful divine principle working here. That when the presence of God works through us and goes out to others, the presence within ourselves far from being lessened, if anything is strengthened. Remember the feeding of the five thousand when they started to divide up and share the five loaves and three fish. It was when they began to let others experience the blessing of the food that they suddenly had more than enough. If they hadn't have started to share it then it wouldn't have multiplied. If you want to increase the presence of God upon your life start sharing it with others. There is no limit to His power and the more you allow Him to use you the greater the anointing will be upon your life.

Now above all other things the Book of Acts demonstrates is that the impact of the Holy Spirit's influence upon a person's life is dramatic, startling. Let us first consider Peter. Leading up to Pentecost, Peter was only just recovering from denying Jesus – not just once or twice, but thrice. And his first denial was to a mere servant girl in a small group of people outside of the high priest's house, soon after Jesus had been arrested.

Luke 22:54-62

Then seizing him [Jesus], they led him away and took him into the house of the high priest. Peter followed at a distance. And when some there had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter sat down with them. A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, "This man was with him."

But he denied it. "Woman, I don't know him," he said.

A little later someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them."

"Man, I am not!" Peter replied.

About an hour later another asserted, "Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean."

Peter replied, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about!" Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly.

Three times he had the opportunity to witness and three times he lacked the courage and boldness. Post Pentecost Peter is a complete transformation of what pre Pentecost Peter used to be. Before, Peter couldn't witness to a slave girl. Now he is seen not only taking the position of leadership amongst the apostles, but raising his voice to the crowds within Jerusalem and witnessing to them boldly about Jesus.

Acts 2:14,

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say.

Acts 2:36-41

"Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah."

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptised, 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. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call."

With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." Those who accepted his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

Pentecost had transformed Peter from a man who three times had said that he didn't know Jesus, to one who was telling everyone who'd listen all about Him. The Holy Spirit had transformed him from a man that was too afraid to share the truth with a slave girl because of a possible threat from the authorities, to a man who would witness to

large crowds of people all at once, bringing 3000 to the Lord in a single day, despite a sure threat from the authorities who had only a few weeks ago crucified Jesus.

That's the full impact of the Holy Spirit upon a life.

Are you timid in your faith? Are there areas where you need a breakthrough? Are there areas of your personality where you wish you could change and be different? Draw closer to God and ask Him for the outpouring of His Spirit to a new measure in your life. He wants you to have the full life-changing experience that Peter had.

Let's look at the example of another New Testament believer, Stephen.

As the numbers in the early church began to grow, there were inevitably issues that needed to be addressed. For one, there were problems in the fair distribution of food amongst some of the early believer's families.

Acts 6:1

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them [those are the ones who had adopted the Greek language and culture into their lives] complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

The apostles addressed the issue by appointing seven believers to overlook the distribution of food. Having experienced the transforming power of Pentecost upon them, the apostles knew what qualifications to look for when choosing the men to do this task. They had to have the power of the Spirit upon their lives.

Acts 6:2-6

So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.

This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

Maybe Stephen had higher ambitions than allocating food supplies to the families of the early church. Whether he did or not, he certainly submitted himself fully to the leadership of the apostles and served wholeheartedly. We know this because the blessing of God upon His life just increased.

Acts 6:8-10

Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

See how he was equipped by the Holy Spirit for the job God had appointed him to do! Take careful note of this please. If currently you are waiting on tables don't think for one minute that God will not use you mightily in other ways. Just look at what he did with Stephen. It's a Godly principle that if we want Him to use us in things that are of great importance then we must prove faithful in matters of less importance.

Luke 16:10 [Jesus' words]

"Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much.

Stephen was a wonderful example of this and soon God would use him as a catalyst for an event that would lead the early church to expand its borders not only beyond Jerusalem and into Judea and Samaria but, as Jesus promised, to the ends of the whole world. The event that did this was Stephen's martyrdom.

Acts 8:1-4

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

A full two chapters of Acts is given up to the events surrounding Stephen. He became much more than a distributor of food because he allowed God to direct his life. You see the Holy Spirit doesn't just give us Godly gifts, He gives us godly character. Stephen oozed godly character. We see this by the way he humbled himself to serve and follow the instructions of the early leaders of the church, and also through the boldness with which he preached and through the extraordinary manner in which he died.

Acts 7:51-60 [Speaking to the members of the Sanhedrin]

"You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it."

When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

What incredible calmness and presence of mind Stephen had during the most horrific of ordeals. This is the power of God's Spirit acting upon Stephen's life. Utter transformation. Stephen's calmness and serenity in the face of this evil and under the huge weight of extreme pain was not natural at all was it? No, it was supernatural of course.

Have you ever wondered how persecuted Christians can have the strength to face death? As Nero tortured believers in the grounds of his palace there are accounts of those being tortured and facing death singing psalms and praising God in the same way that Stephen did. This is the power of the Holy Spirit. This is the life changing power that God promises every believer in the New Testament.

Hebrews 11:35-38

There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawn in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— the world was not worthy of them.

Isn't that a great commendation at the end of those verses for those men and women of God who served faithfully!

There's another significant character that we haven't focused upon yet, whose life was transformed by the Holy Spirit in Acts. Saul. Do you remember where we see him first in the New Testament? We've already been there tonight in fact. It's when Stephen is being stoned to death. He is present there, minding the coats of those putting him to death.

Acts 8:1-4

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Saul was the man leading the persecution and as he did the church spread as a consequence. What he was trying to stop he was inadvertently expanding. Saul must have heard Stephen's words as he was being stoned that day. I wonder what effect they had upon him. May be he was so full of anger that he was deaf to them - but God would find a way to get his attention very soon.

Acts 9:1-9

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. 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. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

The men travelling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

I wonder what God was waiting to do with Saul? What was he making Saul wait for I wonder? Let's read on and find out!

Acts 9:15-19

But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptised, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

A transformed life – this is the power of the Holy Spirit. God had taken a juggernaut of a human being in Saul who had opposed the faith vehemently and at every turn and had transformed him into Paul, ambassador of the faith. With his conversion the church enjoyed a period of peace.

Acts 9:31

Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

Let's go back to the beginning of Acts for a moment and read Acts 1:3 again:

Acts 1:3-5

After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive.

The transformed lives of people like Peter, Stephen and Paul are proof that Jesus is alive. God wants our transformed lives to be further proof. The final chapters of the Acts of the Holy Spirit have yet to be written just as the final names of Hebrews chapter 11 have yet to be added.

How then do we fully live the life that God is calling us to?

Zechariah 4:6

Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord Almighty.

We must wait on Him. Make room for Him. Acknowledge that He is our source.

Acts 1:8

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.