



FEBRUARY 19, 1984

How Believers Experienced the Spirit Before Pentecost

Resource by [John Piper](#) Scripture: [Romans 8:1-8](#) Topic: [The Holy Spirit](#)

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. 3 For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, 4 in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. 5 For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. 6 For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 7 For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. 8 Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

The difference between a historian and a preacher is that the historian says, "Was it so?" and the preacher says, "So what?" I took a course in seminary on the Old Testament wisdom literature where we talked about Hebrew poetic parallelism and determinism and *Heilsgeschichte* ("salvation history") and I would generally raise my hand at the end of class and say, "So what?" I never have believed in knowledge for its own sake or art for art's sake. Such notions have always struck me as profoundly atheistic. Surely for a Christian the only reason to study or be artistic is for *God's* sake. "Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" ([1 Corinthians 10:31](#)). And I can't help but think that knowledge for its own sake or art for art's sake is a very callous and unloving motto. Surely for a Christian all study and all creative work must justify itself in terms of love. "Let all things be done for *edification*" ([1 Corinthians 14:26](#)). "Let all that you do be done in love" ([1 Corinthians 16:13](#)). Learning and labor which do not lead people in love to God are not prompted by the Spirit of Christ.

The Outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost

So when I pose myself a question like, "How did believers experience the Holy Spirit before Pentecost?" I can't think about it more than five minutes without saying, "So what?" Does anybody care? Would it make any difference for our lives today if we knew the answer? I think it will make a difference. I wouldn't bother with the question if I didn't. I want to show you ten ways the Old Testament saints experienced the Holy Spirit. But first let me tell you why I think it is so relevant.

Pentecost was a Jewish festival fifty days after the Passover. Jesus was crucified during the Passover celebration. Seven weeks later, on the day of Pentecost, the risen Lord Jesus fulfilled the promise he had made in

John 15:26—namely, that he would send the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist had promised: The one who comes after me "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Luke 3:16). So at 9:00 on Pentecost morning, while the disciples were praying, "a sound came from heaven like a rush of mighty wind . . . and there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2:2-4). Then Peter preached a sermon and said, "This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel, 'And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams'" (Acts 2:16-17).

In other words, Peter says, we have entered the last days: the Messiah has come, he has accomplished redemption on the cross, he has risen and ascended to the right hand of God, and the interval before he returns in glory will be marked by an incomparable outpouring of the Holy Spirit on men and women, old and young, slave and free, near and far. And the people of God in this period are to be a people born of the Spirit, baptized in the Spirit, filled with the Spirit, empowered by the Spirit to bear witness to "the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ." We live in the latter days of the Spirit. We live in the days that Isaiah (44:3) and Ezekiel (11:19; 36:26f.; 39:29) and Joel (2:28) prophesied and longed to see. There are no more decisive turning points in redemptive history that must happen before Jesus returns to establish his kingdom. This is it. These are the days of Pentecost, the days of the fullness of the Spirit, the days of worldwide mission.

The Difference of the Aswan High Dam

Now let me suggest an analogy to illustrate the experience of the Spirit before and after Pentecost. Picture a huge dam for hydroelectric power under construction, like the Aswan High Dam on the Nile, 375 feet high and 11,000 feet across. Egypt's President Nasser announced the plan for construction in 1953. The dam was completed in 1970 and in 1971 there was a grand dedication ceremony and the 12 turbines with their ten billion kilowatt-hour capacity were unleashed with enough power to light every city in Egypt. During the long period of construction the Nile River wasn't completely stopped. Even as the reservoir was filling, part of the river was allowed to flow past. The country folk downstream depended on it. They drank it, they washed in it, it watered their crops and turned their mill-wheels. They sailed on it in the moonlight and wrote songs about it. It was their life. But on the day when the reservoir poured through the turbines a power was unleashed that spread far beyond the few folk down river and brought possibilities they had only dreamed of.

Well, Pentecost is like the dedicatory opening of the Aswan High Dam. Before Pentecost the river of God's Spirit blessed the people of Israel and was their very life. But after Pentecost the power of the Spirit spread out to light the whole world. None of the benefits enjoyed in the pre-Pentecostal days were taken away. But ten billion kilowatts were added to enable the church to take the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ to every tongue and tribe and nation.

So here's my answer to why the experience of the Old Testament saints is valuable for us today. If these saints experienced privileges and powers in the Holy Spirit before the dam was opened, how much more should we in these billion kilowatt days experience these things or more. A survey of Old Testament spiritual experience is needed to wake us up to *our* privileges in these last days that were inaugurated at Pentecost. The church today is so sleepy that some of us have even fallen behind the Old Testament saints in our appropriation of what the Spirit has to give.

Ten Ways OT Saints Experienced the Holy Spirit

So here are ten ways Old Testament believers experienced the Holy Spirit which in these "last days" of Pentecostal fulfillment ought to be enjoyed by the church.

1. The Spirit as Creator and Sustainer of Life

First, and most basic, the OT believers were conscious of God's Spirit as the *Creator and Sustainer of their natural life*. In [Job 33:4](#) Elihu speaks for all faithful Jews when he says, "The Spirit of God has made me and the breath of the Almighty gives me life." Psalm 104 celebrates the wonder and variety of all living things and says (vv. 29–30), "When thou takest away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When thou sendest forth thy Spirit, they are created; and thou renewest the face of the ground."

I hope you share this world view with the OT saints: namely, that your conception as a person in your mother's womb was a sovereign act of creation by God's Spirit and that every breath you take now and every chemical transaction in the cells of your body is sustained every moment by work of the Holy Spirit. The world we grew up in and live in does not see things this way. And we have by and large absorbed their mechanistic view of things. The *world* sees a mechanical process of evolution and natural selection. But the *Christian* ought to see the creative, imaginative work of God's Spirit. And every breath you take ought to be a prayer of thanks that you live and move and have your being in the Spirit of God.

2. New Birth and Indwelling of the Spirit

Second, the OT believers experienced the *new birth and indwelling of the Holy Spirit*. When Nicodemus was bewildered about Jesus' demand for new birth by the Spirit, Jesus responded ([John 3:10](#)), "Are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand this?" In other words, I'm not teaching or requiring anything new. Any Israelite who has ever been saved had to be born again by God's Spirit. Otherwise how would they ever overcome their natural hostility to God? How could they have ever submitted to God's law and pleased him—as many did, like Abel and Noah and Abraham and Moses and Rahab and Ruth and Deborah and David?

Paul says in [Romans 8:7–9](#), "The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, indeed, it cannot; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit if the Spirit of God really dwells in you." There are two groups of humans: those in the flesh (born of the flesh) and those in the Spirit (born again of the Spirit). Those in the flesh are devoid of the Spirit and cannot submit to God's law or please God. Those in the Spirit are indwelt by the Spirit and are enabled by him to fulfill the just requirement of the law.

This means that all the saints of the OT who trusted God and followed his ways in the obedience of faith were born again by the Spirit and indwelt by the Spirit. For example, [Numbers 14:24](#) says of Caleb, "My servant Caleb, *because he has a different Spirit* and has followed me fully, I will bring into this land." And [Numbers 27: 18](#) says, "And the Lord said to Moses, "Take Joshua the son of Nun, *in whom is the spirit*, and lay your hand upon him.'" The OT believers were saved the same way we are: they were born of the Spirit, they trusted in God's promises, and they followed his commandments in the obedience of faith.

3. The Constant Presence of the Spirit

Third, the OT believers enjoyed *the constant presence of God's Spirit*.

[Psalm 139:7–10](#) says, "Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend to heaven, thou art there! If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there thy hand shall lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me." Old Testament believers enjoyed the presence of God's Spirit wherever they went. It gives me a lot of encouragement, when I am called to go places where I feel insecure, to know that the Spirit is within to give me the words I need and that he is also already in the place where I am going to prepare the way and to hold me when I get there.

4. The Spirit as Counselor and Teacher

Fourth, OT believers experienced the Spirit of God as *their Counselor or Teacher*. In [Nehemiah 9](#), Ezra gives thanks to God for all his past benefits to Israel and says in verse 20, "*Thou gavest thy good Spirit to instruct them and didst not withhold thy manna from their mouth.*" Probably the Spirit was their instructor in two senses. It was by God's Spirit that the prophets spoke to the people God's Word ([Nehemiah 9:30](#)), and it was by the Spirit that the people were enabled to grasp and apply the Word. Today the Spirit still instructs us by the Word of Scripture and we ought to pray earnestly for an outpouring of God's enlightening Spirit so that the Scriptures really live for us and become intensely personal.

5. The Gifts of Craftsmanship and Artistic Ability

Fifth, the OT saints believed that *craftsmanship and artistic ability in the service of God was a gift of the Holy Spirit*. God not only designed how he wanted his tabernacle built, he also equipped the craftsmen to do it. [Exodus 31:1–5](#) says, "The Lord said to Moses, 'See, I have called by name Bezalel . . . and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting and in carving wood, for work in every craft.'"

In one sense, all craftsmanship and artistic ability is a gift of God, just like our breath is. But the text says that God called Bezalel by name and filled him with his Spirit. And I think there was and is today a special touch or filling of the Holy Spirit that elevates the work of an artist or a musician or a craftsman from mere technical skill to divinely empowered ministry that exalts God and builds faith.

6. Power to Denounce Evil and Declare Righteousness

Sixth, OT believers experienced *the filling of the Holy Spirit as a power to be bold in denouncing evil and declaring righteousness*. [Micah 3:8](#) says, "As for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin." It doesn't lie within man's own power to risk his life and stand up for the truth of God and denounce sin. The Spirit gives that courage. [Luke 1:15](#) says that John the Baptist was filled with the Spirit from his mother's womb—and he got his head chopped off for denouncing Herod's unlawful marriage.

Surely we have need today of men and women filled by the Spirit to expose and denounce evils in our society that are hardly blinked at any more: the exploitation of women's bodies and debasement in advertising, the unconscionable destruction of human life through abortion on demand, the

maneuvers of our own country to destabilize other governments, the gross waste and gluttony of American life, the cavalier attitude to divorce and remarriage which God hates, and the multi-million dollar promotion of alcohol and cigarettes as anything less than family-destroyers and body-killers. When people are filled with the Holy Spirit, they do not blink at evil.

7. Victory over Fear

Seventh, the saints of old experienced *victory over fear by the presence of the Spirit*. When God wanted to encourage the people to rebuild the temple after the exile, he said, "Work, for I am with you . . . My Spirit abides among you. Fear not" ([Haggai 2:5](#)). Just think, if Jews returning from God's judgment in Babylonian exile can take heart that God's Spirit will protect them, how much more fearless should we be who have the overwhelming assurance of God's love and power in Jesus' death and resurrection! Old Testament saints knew then and Christians know today that victory over all threats and obstacles belongs to God. [Zechariah 4:6](#) says, "Not by might nor by power but *by my Spirit* says the Lord of hosts."

8. Extraordinary Feats of Power to Help God's People

Eighth, some OT believers were enabled by the Spirit to do *extraordinary feats of power* to help God's people. For example, in the life of Samson we read, "The Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him and he tore the lion asunder as one tears a kid" ([Judges 14:6](#)). Or: "The Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him and the ropes which were on his arms became as flax" ([15:14](#)). It wasn't a common manifestation of the Spirit, but it was real then and it is today. Every now and then in extraordinary circumstances of need the Spirit enables ordinary Christians to perform amazing feats of rescue far beyond their ordinary capacity—like lifting a car off of a pinned husband or escaping from a raging rapist.

9. The Ability to Interpret God's Revelation in Dreams

Ninth, the Spirit enabled some OT believers *to interpret God's revelation in dreams*. After Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream about the coming famine, Pharaoh says, "Can we find such a man as this in whom is the Spirit of God?" On the day of Pentecost Peter said that in these *last days* "your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams" ([Acts 2:17](#)). If these latter days are to be days of dreams and visions from the Holy Spirit, we had better pray earnestly for gifted Josephs to arise among us who can discern truth and error in such claims.

10. The Gift of Prophecy

Finally, the Holy Spirit gave some in the OT *a gift of prophecy*. For example, when Moses gathered with the seventy elders of Israel at the tabernacle, it says in [Numbers 11:25](#), "The Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him and took some of the Spirit that was upon him and put it upon the seventy elders; and when the Spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did so no more." Evidently, God only gave a brief taste of prophetic powers to the seventy elders. It seemed to point to something more that might come in the future.

Four verses later Moses says, "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his Spirit upon them" (v. 29). Which again points forward to the last days inaugurated at Pentecost. Peter says, "In the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and *your sons and your daughters will prophesy*." What is this gift of prophecy? Where

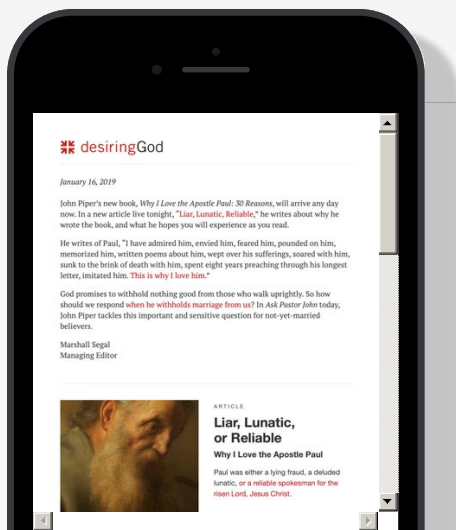
is it being manifested in the church today? Or is it? At least part of the answer to that is found in the teaching on spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12–14, which we will soon begin to study in an evening series.

This morning let me close simply by returning to the Aswan High Dam for a moment. Even before the dam was completed and the reservoir was officially unleashed on the day of Pentecost, the OT saints downstream enjoyed stupendous benefits from the river of God's Spirit. We do well to read about these things, and ask ourselves the simple question: if they experienced so much of God's Spirit which was but a trickle of the reservoir, how much more should we enjoy under the dozen turbines of Pentecost?

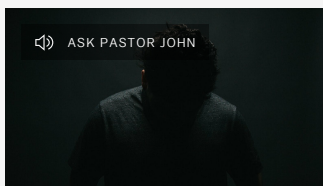
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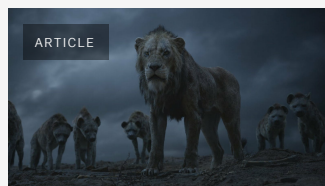


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JUL 17, 2019

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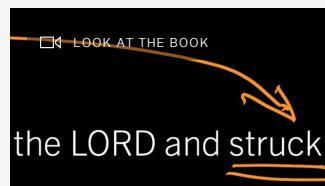
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