Bible Study

The Holy Spirit

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I write this Bible Study with a great degree of trepidation, for the theme I have been given is 'renewal', with an emphasis upon the work of the Holy Spirit. I am only too aware that RE:VIVE readers are people who long for a deeper movement of the Holy Spirit and will have no doubt heard every sermon and read every book on the topic, so forgive me if you have heard it all before!

I want us to focus upon three areas:

- Who did the Holy Spirit come to?
- How the Holy Spirit might touch us
- Facing up to the mystery

WHO DID THE HOLY SPIRIT COME TO? - ACTS 2:1-13

The first group the Holy Spirit came to were the disciples. They are often portrayed as eagerly waiting to see what might happen, but in truth they were struggling with faith and struggling to find a future; in fact, at the end of the Gospel of Matthew (28:17), we are told that even in the presence of the Risen Christ 'some doubted'. So here you have a group of people who don't have a clue as to what has really happened or what they are to do, with some even none too clear as to whether or not Jesus is risen from the dead - but the Holy Spirit still comes to meet with them! Isn't that so encouraging?

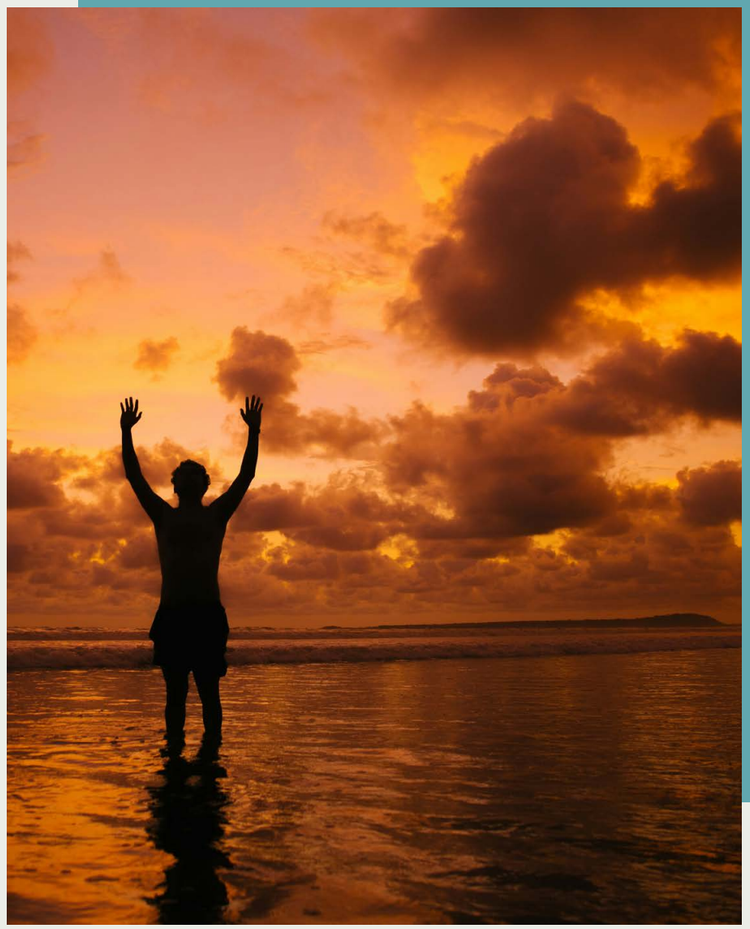
You may not be clear as to exactly what your faith is all about, or as to exactly what the work of the Holy Spirit is; in fact, you may not even be at all certain as to whether or not you actually want a deeper experience of God through the work of the Holy Spirit. But the Spirit comes when the Spirit comes! He comes in love to fill you; he comes in a mighty wind to turn you in the right direction; he comes in flames of fire to deal with and burn up all the dross and sin of your past; he comes with tongues to give you a new language of love. You don't need to be ready, for the Holy Spirit is ready!

The second group to whom the Spirit came were the onlookers; we read about them in verses 5 to 13. They come from across the known world and we are also told that they were 'God-fearing'. These are people looking for truth, seeking the reality of faith rather than just religion. We read their response in verses 11 & 12: 'What does this mean?'

You see, when the Holy Spirit works in power, people notice and become open to the good news of Jesus; indeed, Peter builds upon this to preach a sermon explaining what has happened, and we are told that thousands came to faith.

When people see the Holy Spirit actually working, they become open to faith.

For a while, I was a prison chaplain, and one task prison chaplains have is to interview each new arrival. One guy arrived in a real state because he didn't know what was happening to him and was worried that he was cracking up. I asked him about the issue and he told me that, because the Bible was the only book in his cell, he had started to read it, then he thought he might try a prayer, but instead of intelligible words coming out, all that he spoke seemed to come out as gibberish. I read him this passage from Acts and explained to him that what had happened was that he had been filled with the Holy Spirit and given the gift of tongues. I can tell you he went away not only rejoicing but also greatly relieved! Let's ask the Spirit to work so powerfully that people notice.



HOW THE HOLY SPIRIT MIGHT TOUCH US - EPHESIANS 5:18-20

I am sure that we don't just want to read about the Holy Spirit, we also want to encounter the Holy Spirit, which is part of our Methodist heritage. We are familiar with hearts that are 'strangely warmed' and 'all can know that they are saved'.

In seeking this encounter, we often hear fervent prayers and pleading, such as 'Come Holy Spirit', but I have to be honest and say that I really struggle with that phrase! It is a phrase that we often use in songs and in prayers, but it is nowhere to be found in the Bible. I struggle with it because if we are inviting the Holy Spirit to come, it rather seems to imply that until we pray that prayer the Holy Spirit is absent. Just to be quite clear here: we do not command God the Holy Spirit to come and go with our prayers; the Holy Spirit is not a power or a person to be summoned when we have the fervour of a religious moment!

Now, of course, I understand what we all mean in our hearts when we pray 'Come Holy Spirit'. We are hoping and praying for a deeper experience of God, but that experience is a gift of God which is graciously given, not an experiential gift to be demanded. So let us pray 'Come Holy Spirit' by all means if it is helpful, but as we pray, let us humbly realise that what we are doing is asking God to make real the presence of the Helper who is already there.

Perhaps a better approach is to ask for the fullness of the Holy Spirit (v. 18b). Think of that time you were having a wonderful meal and the host asks if you would like another helping of pudding. Well, of course you would, but you say no because you are full and just don't have any more room. Ask yourself: what do you make room for in your life? Ask yourself: what is filling you? Paul suggests here that, as disciples of Jesus, we should be making room for the Holy Spirit, making room for God's presence.

FACING UP TO THE MYSTERY - JOHN 3:1-8

I wonder if one of the problems that we evangelicals wrestle with is that we like everything neatly tied up! Our problem is that you just can't do it with God. As the poet Sydney Carter said: 'Catch the bird of heaven, lock him in a cage of gold, look again tomorrow and he will be gone'. As the Gospel writer John writes here: 'The wind blows where it pleases' (John 3:8). How frustrating this is!

We pray for a movement of the Holy Spirit in a meeting and nothing happens, we pray that a friend might find Christ but she does not, we pray for a particular gift of the Holy Spirit, but we do not receive it. How very much we would like it if we organised things rather than God! But the Spirit blows where the Spirit blows.

I have led six churches in my ministry, preaching the same gospel, setting the same priorities, working alongside committed lay folk. In three of them, we moved into a very real experience of the Holy Spirit in our worship and life together, in the other three we faithfully soldiered on. When the Spirit came, the Spirit came; each time it was after some years: so hard to define, but something you could sense. We need to learn to live with mystery at the heart of our faith. Perhaps this is why so many young people are at present being drawn into the Catholic and Orthodox faith. We may not approve in any way of 'smells and bells', but the rituals point to that which is beyond. The Holy Spirit is always here, but also always there, always working - but not always working within either the confined walls of a church building or the confining doctrines of a particular theological position.

Questions for personal or group study

Read each passage slowly and thoughtfully before the discussion or your personal reflection.

READ: ACTS 2:1-13

1. Have you ever experienced a time when you felt the Holy Spirit was sweeping in to shake up your life?
2. The Spirit came as cleansing fire. To what extent do we neglect the issue of repentance?

READ: EPHESIANS 5:18-20

3. Sit for a moment and ask yourself what it is that fills your life (not necessarily negative things; think also of family, friends, Christian service, etc). Does this leave room for the Holy Spirit?
4. What do you think being 'filled with the Spirit' (v. 18) might mean for you?

READ: JOHN 3:1-8

5. Do you resonate in any way with the fact that the wind of the Spirit blowing 'wherever it pleases' is a bit frustrating?
6. What space do you leave in your faith for mystery?

Try simply sitting quietly for ten minutes a day – no reading, no music – and see if that makes some of the space you need to experience the fullness of the Holy Spirit.

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