

Sunday 26th May 2024 - That's The Spirit! : God's Personal Presence

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] Morning, morning. Good to see you. And as Marie was saying, we're easing our way into this new Sunday series, which we're calling That's the Spirit, a series in which we're exploring who the Holy Spirit is and how this spirit is at work in our lives.

And so if you were here last week or you've caught up online, you'll have heard the multilingual Dave kick off this series for us by, it's impressive, it was impressive, kicking off the series for us by unpacking the significance of the day that we know as Pentecost, this day some 2,000 years ago when the Spirit of God showed up in a special way.

On that occasion, the Holy Spirit enabled the early followers of Jesus to speak in all sorts of languages, perhaps a sign that the Holy Spirit is for everyone of every background, of every culture. Indeed, throughout this series, we're looking at the way in which the Spirit both, we could say, inhabits and inspires a whole host of qualities and characteristics.

So we'll look at things like holiness and service, prophecy, wisdom, grace, generosity, comfort, and so on, always and more in which God's personal presence is shared and lived out in practice.

[1 : 26] But before we get into some of those more specific qualities in the weeks to come, what I'd like to do this morning, if I can, please, is to explore some of the backstory, if you like, of the Spirit.

Because, as I hope we'll see, when we talk about God's personal presence with us, I'd say it's the most life-shaping, life-giving, and life-enhancing presence that we could ever hope to encounter. Now, just to say at the top, whether we say Holy Spirit or Spirit of God or the Spirit, they're all just different ways, different names, perhaps, that we give to God's personal presence with us and in the world.

Indeed, that's why the Spirit, when we talk about the Holy Spirit, the Spirit always has a capital letter because it's a name. You know, the Spirit, the Holy Spirit is not an it, because the Spirit is God with us, as we say in this deeply personal way.

And so whilst we talk, as Dave did last week, about the way in which the Holy Spirit came in a special way at Pentecost, God's Spirit is always and always has been present because God is always present.

[2 : 47] Indeed, on page one of the Bible, even before the whole Genesis creation story kicks into being, you know, we're told this, for example, that in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

Now, the earth was formless and void. Darkness was over the surface of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. I like that word, hovering.

It's a good word. It's a word perhaps full of sort of anticipation, almost like God's Spirit is pausing to weigh things up, you know, look around, take a breath almost, before seemingly swooping down and getting creation going.

There's an energy there in that word, which I think is in itself interesting, because in the Hebrew language in which the Old Testament was originally written, the word we translate into English as spirit is this word in Hebrew, ruach, ruach.

Yes, Tom. Yes, Tom. Now, I appreciate if you've got hay fever, you might be a bit phlegmy at the moment, but we're going to say a little Hebrew this morning, but you've got to get the sort of guttural hach going at the end there.

[3 : 59] Okay. So I hope you know your neighbor well. If not, you will do by the end of this word. So you want to say ruach with me. A one, two, three, ruach, and then swallow. Excellent. Well done.

Well done. Now, why is this word ruach? Why is it interesting and how is it connected to energy? Well, this word ruach, it has various meanings, one of which is spirit, but it can also mean wind or breath.

So straight away in verse two of the whole Bible, the writers want us to be thinking of God's spirit, it seems, in terms of movement and energy, you know, like the wind, which makes tree branches sway, or the breath in our lungs, which gives us energy and above all life.

What else might this tell us? Well, just perhaps like wind and like breath, the spirit of God is invisible. We can't see the spirit. Just like wind, God's spirit is powerful.

And just like breath, God's spirit is life-giving. But it's, whilst it's also true that the wind, like God's spirit, is all around us, so like breath, God's spirit is in us as well.

[5 : 20] Indeed, because this word ruach can be translated at one and the same time as wind or breath or spirit, seems in the Bible is almost a kind of deliberate vagueness, you know, a lack of distinction in the Bible between these ways of understanding the ruach of God.

And so that means that the spirit of God, which was hovering over the waters of the deep before the creation of the world, is the same spirit, the same power, the same presence, who is both with us and in us now.

I mean, if you take a breath for a moment, literally take a breath, just breathe in. Because that very breath is the ruach, the breath, the spirit of God filling up our lungs and giving us life, every time we breathe, we're connecting with that same spirit of God who is hovering over the waters of creation. And I find that pretty amazing, really. And whilst we could say that every person, and therefore everyone we read about in the Bible, has the ruach, the breath, the spirit of God in their lungs, there's more to God's personal presence with us than simply, I say simply, giving us life in the first place.

For example, there are various times in the Old Testament where we see God's spirit giving special abilities or special power to people for particular tasks.

[6 : 56] So, there's this guy, Joseph, the one of the Technicolor Dreamcoat, you know, the coat of many colors and so on. We're told that he's given a special ability to interpret dreams, so much so that it prompts Pharaoh, Egyptian leader, to say this.

He says, The spirit of God, this phrase in Hebrew, that's ruach Elohim in Hebrew.

Exactly the same phrase for the spirit of God that's found in Genesis 1 verse 2 when it talks about the spirit of God and how it's described, as I say, as hovering over the surface of the waters.

And so, the spirit of God, as well as being life-giving, as we see for Joseph, is also life-shaping. You know, here in Joseph's case, giving him special insight or wisdom.

And interestingly, that Pharaoh identifies here. I think Pharaoh's comments make him the first recorded person in the Bible to recognize that the spirit of God is in someone and helping them to do a certain thing.

[8 : 10] Something I think we'd probably do well to remember if we're ever tempted to think that only Christians can recognize when God is at work. Who else?

Well, there's a guy called Bezalel. We're told God describes to Moses in this way. He says this about him. He said, See, I have chosen Bezalel, and I've filled him with the spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge, and with all the kinds of skills to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver, and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to enlarge in all kinds, engage, sorry, in all kinds of crafts.

Now, Bezalel is the first person in the Bible described as being filled with the spirit of God. And for what purpose?

Well, for Bezalel, it's for art and metalwork and woodwork and sculpture, you know, all kinds of crafts. The spirit of God, again, this same phrase, the Ruach Elohim, that was there in the creation of the world, is now in Bezalel, helping him to create beautiful things.

And I don't know about you, but I love it that Bezalel, this guy we don't really talk about very often, but he's highlighted in this way because it emphasizes that God's spirit is not always or even primarily about so-called spiritual practices, but rather it seems is about making practices spiritual.

[9 : 51] Does that make sense? It's not about spiritual practices, but about making practices spiritual. So Bezalel, you know, he's not famous. He wasn't, as far as we know, a great preacher or prayer.

He wasn't a leader. He wasn't a courageous missionary or some charismatic fellow or anything. It doesn't seem, no, what he's singled out for is that he was a great woodworker, gifted craftsman. And that was how he communicated his spirit-inspired wisdom and understanding and knowledge about God. Indeed, if everything that we see that is good and creative ultimately comes from our good creator, God, and is inspired by him, then I guess no wonder music and painting and sculpture and artistry move us.

You know, no wonder watercolour dabbling and diamond art pictures and flower arranging and so on give us joy because it's a way of connecting perhaps and giving expression to the spirit of God who dwells within.

Equally though, this same spirit is also described in the Old Testament as giving certain leaders and kings and prophets the right words to say at the right time. So King David here, he describes this inspiration like this.

[11:15] In this instance, a poem that he shares, which are his last recorded words in the Bible, which he begins like this. He says, The spirit of the Lord spoke through me.

His word was on my tongue. Spirit of the Lord, this phrase. That one is Ruach Yahweh. Another way to describe this same spirit of God.

Did we talk about words being inspired? You know, inspired. We might say inspiration. We might say expiration, respiration. It's all this kind of breathing language.

So God's breath, God's spirit inspires so that people can expire. We might say exhale the words God has given them just as David believed was the case with his final words here.

How does that work? In practice, this idea of speaking words that God might give us. Well, again, I guess just as inspiration might strike for an artist.

[12:21] So I imagine we'll each be aware of those times when perhaps you're in need of some encouragement or comfort or guidance and someone comes along and almost out of blue sometimes just says exactly the right thing in the right way, just at the right time.

So I know for me, this has happened on numerous occasions through God encouraging me, I guess, in certain ways over the years. I think for me, the most recent one was a few months ago, for example.

It's fair to say I was having one of my low episodes in life. I got this depression that I live with and sort of comes and goes, get my ups and downs and stuff as the year sort of goes on.

And in my prayer times, particularly low time a few months ago, one image that kept coming to me with God was of God singing a song over me.

Now, I used to sing to our kids at bedtime when they were little, just sort of hold them and sing a quiet lullaby to them, partly to soothe them and to try and get them to sleep, but mainly as my own little quiet private way, I guess, of expressing my love for them.

[13:41] And as I say, in my prayers during this most recent low period, I was reminded that as much as I as a dad loved my children in those moments of singing over them when they were little, then how much more was God, my heavenly father, singing over me and holding me in his arms?

Now, at the same time, as I'm sort of sensing that message, if you like, that word of encouragement from God through the spirit, similar time, I got a text from a mate who I hadn't spoken to for ages, who just messaged me out of the blue and he said, I hope God's voice starts singing to you and encouraging you.

And then around the same time, another friend felt prompted to give me a picture in a frame. And it's this one here.

And it says, there's a song being sung over you. And I've got that on the shelf in my office. Again, they weren't sure perhaps how much that meant to me, but it really did because it validated and connected with the message perhaps that I was hearing that I needed to hear from the spirit.

It could be coincidence. I'm not suggesting this is all, you know, definitively God speaking. And it may well be coincidence. Or my gut says it could be God's spirit, you know, God's ruach, inspiring people to share with me words of comfort that resonated with what God's spirit was also trying to encourage me with.

[15:20] I like to think it is God's spirit. Through other people, breathing, if you like, speaking in this case, perhaps singing over me. And so for each of us, you know, whenever we get a thought or a word popping into our minds or our prayers or a picture of someone's face or whatever, something for someone, it seems.

If it's encouraging, if it's kind, if it's loving, then I'd encourage us, no matter how random or left field that kind of thought might feel, do share it with them.

Because what's the worst that can happen? You're going to look a bit of an idiot. That's okay. We can all handle that. At best, though, it may just be from God as the very thing that that person needs to hear.

Now, these examples from the Old Testament of God's spirit, God's ruach, inspiring people at certain times and in certain ways, such as Joseph and Bezalel and David and so on.

And there are dozens of other similar stories that we could have picked this morning from the Old Testament. They're all, it seems, building a picture and pointing towards the time at Pentecost when God's spirit, this same ruach, would come and be offered to each of us in a way which is far more widespread, but still in that deeply personal way.

[16:50] Indeed, if we fast forward to Jesus, there are various episodes in his life which illustrate, I think, and anticipate the way in which the spirit of God will be available for each of us through him.

So we see, for example, at Jesus' baptism, you know, echoes of the way in which the spirit of God hovered over the waters of creation in Genesis 1 and with the way in which we're told the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in bodily form like a dove, you know, inspiring and equipping Jesus to begin his earthly ministry.

And in a way, kind of echoing that Genesis creation, Jesus offers that new creation, new hope to people from this point on in his ministry. Indeed, just a few weeks after his baptism, we're told about a time when Jesus perhaps underlined the way in which God's spirit was working through him when he got up to speak in a synagogue.

And let's just see what he says as he kind of launches his public ministry. Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the spirit and news about him spread through the whole countryside.

He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And on the Sabbath day, he went into the synagogue as was his custom.

[18:22] He stood up to read, 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 has 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. 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. Jesus says, The Spirit of the Lord is on me.

Once again, the same Spirit of God that was present at creation, giving life in general, and then in more specific ways, with certain people over time, now inspiring Jesus to declare the good news of the kingdom of God.

[19:44] Indeed, again, just a little while later, there's another episode in Jesus' life, which is easy to miss, but which for me reveals the way in which he was fully aware of the connection between God's Spirit in our lives and God's breath in our lungs.

Indeed, it takes place right at the beginning of Jesus' sermon on the mount, you know, his core teaching. I don't want to say manifesto in these current times, but it's kind of Jesus' manifesto, really.

His core teaching of what it means to live life in God's ways. And so right at the beginning of the sermon on the mount, we're told this in Matthew's Gospel, that then when he saw the crowds, Jesus went up on a mount inside and sat down.

Jesus' disciples came to him, then he opened his mouth and taught them. Now, where's God's Spirit? Where's God's Ruach mentioned here?

Well, it's not. It's not specifically. And yet, if we look at this verse, it's got this strange little detail when it says, then he opened his mouth. Which is a bit redundant.

[20:55] Of course he did. If he's going to speak, of course he's going to open his mouth. You can't, you know, you've got to open your mouth, obviously, to speak. So why include that fact in Matthew's telling of this? Well, some scholars reckon that this inclusion is deliberate on Matthew's part because it's his way of saying, Jesus opened his mouth, took a deep breath, and started to share his wisdom with them.

Now, it could be that just Jesus was taking a deep breath because he needs to project his voice in a kind of very human kind of way. Maybe. But might it not also be that Jesus is intentionally doing what we did earlier, breathing in the breath, the spirit, the knowledge of the Ruach of God, so that as he starts this all-important sermon, he knew that his words would be totally inspired, literally, by his heavenly father.

The next time that we're perhaps encouraged to take a deep breath before tackling something important, I think that can easily become a prayer that we might be filled afresh by God's spirit, God's breath, giving us the words and the wisdom and the way to live.

When you take a deep breath, no one will know, but that's between you and God saying, be with me, God, in this. And if we're in any doubt that Jesus seemed to understand the importance of seeing breath as a way of receiving God's spirit, we see Jesus offer just that to his disciples on the evening of his resurrection.

We're told this, that Jesus said, peace be with you. As the father has sent me, I am sending you. And with that, he breathed on them and said, receive the Holy Spirit.

[22 : 49] So just as God breathed the breath of life into the first human in that creation story of Genesis, so here, Jesus breathes, it seems, that same life, that same spirit into the lives of his disciples.

As we saw last week, that breath, that ruach, that wind, would soon blow through all the lives of Jesus' followers when the Holy Spirit was given to everyone in that same personal, indwelling way at Pentecost.

And as Dave shared last week, that same breath, that same wind, that same spirit, is now offered and available to you and to me in that same ongoing, life-giving, life-shaping way today.

Indeed, I just want to leave us with one final illustration, perhaps, of, yeah, what the personal presence of God's spirit in our lives is all about.

Because, as the breath of Jesus, on the one hand, and then perhaps, as the wind of the spirit of Pentecost, on the other, show us. God's ruach can inspire us in both immensely gentle ways, like a breath, or incredibly powerful ways, as well.

[24 : 08] In fact, it's a bit like a hairdryer, I want to say, this morning. A hairdryer that has multiple speeds. And I've borrowed one this morning to demonstrate.

Now, this isn't mine, this is Gemma's. I have no need of a hairdryer, as you can probably do my chest, I suppose, under the arms, but it's not quite the same, is it? So, this is Gemma's hairdryer. But it illustrates for me how God's spirit can be sort of gentle and calming, or can be pretty powerful, pretty powerful in our lives.

You know, whether it's gentle or powerful, they're both God's ruach through which the spirit knows best, perhaps, what level to sort of blow his breath, his wind into our lives.

We might say, God's peace and God's power as well. Now, the invitation from God, I'd say, is for us to allow and invite God's spirit to lead us, you know, to go with the flow, if you like, of wherever God's spirit, God's breath, God's wind leads.

And so, if we were to imagine for a moment that we are a ping pong ball, okay, you and I are a ping pong ball. Now, to get this personal, we need to draw a little face on this one, don't we?

[25 : 35] So, we'll put some eyes on it. There we go. A little smiley face. So, there we go. This is you and I. Imagine this in your mind, okay, as a ping pong ball.

Now, just as this ping pong ball is filled originally with air, so each of us have God's life, breath within us, his spirit in our lungs.

That's God's gift of everyday life to each and every person the world over. But the invitation from God through Jesus and by this same spirit is to allow God not to just give us life as a general thing, but to shape and direct our lives that he's given us.

To help us if we like to go with the flow of wherever God's breath, wherever God's wind, wherever God's spirit leads us. And so, when we place ourselves in God's hands and put our trust in him, this happens, I would suggest.

Hey, magic. So, God's spirit, I would say, is in the business of, we could say, supporting us and warming us, sustaining us and inspiring us.

[26 : 58] We can't see it, but we can feel the effects of God's spirit in our lives. Now, life will have, obviously, its ups and its downs as well, but God's spirit is constant in that.

It might even wobble us around a little bit and take us places that we're not quite sure we knew we could go. But as I say, God's spirit is constant in there.

And the more time we spend in God's presence, with God's personal presence, then the more natural it becomes, I'd say, to go in a direction that God would want us to go in life.

And again, learning to trust that God in a powerful way or sometimes in a more gentle way will be the one who leads us all through life.

So, that, my friends, I would say is one way in which the spirit works.

[28 : 03] And my prayer is that you and I would increasingly know and trust the inspiring, life-giving, life-shaping, personal presence of God's spirit, God's ruach, God's breath, God's wind in our lives.

Amen.