

**What We Believe About the Holy Spirit and Why It Matters:
Exploring the Apostles' Creed
Acts 2:1-4 and Galatians 5:22-26
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As we saw last week, the paragraph on Jesus is by far the longest portion of the Apostles' Creed. No less than 10 statements are made about Jesus. So, it is something of a shock to come to the third member of the Trinity and read only this: "I believe in the Holy Spirit." It is, arguably, the most understated line in the entire Creed.

Before we delve into what Scripture says about the Spirit, I'd like us to think together about the voices we hear in our heads, and the forces that shape and influence our lives.

We all have voices we hear in our heads or perhaps, deep in our hearts—those non-audible voices, some which are good, and some not so good. Sometimes we hear old tapes from childhood, such as a parent or teacher or authority figure telling us we're "bad" or "lazy" or "not good enough." Sometimes we hear voices that tell us that we'll always feel as depressed as we do right now, or that we're not strong or smart enough to deal with our present circumstances. Sometimes the voices remind us of the hurts we have inflicted on others or the failures we have suffered, and in so doing, keep us mired in resentment or bitterness. Sometimes the voices lure us to indulge in habits that enslave and destroy us.

Then there are the actual human voices we listen to as well. Some of these voices influence us positively, encouraging us to be loving, compassionate and kind. Others influence us to harden our hearts and do things we should never do. An example of the latter is the radio broadcasts in Rwanda in 1993 and '94 that fueled racial violence and incited the genocide that left 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu dead.

Among the positive voices we hear are those that lead us to be more authentically human; they call us to love, inspire us to serve, and challenge us to be more than we otherwise would be. These voices help us know that our lives matter and that we are valued and loved. Loving parents and grandparents provide these voices. The best leaders in religion, politics, business, sports and education do the same.

What voices do you listen to? Do these voices—friends, media, politicians, family, even preachers—lead you to become more like the person God wants you to be or less? How are the voices shaping your soul? The truth is that we're in for a real fight if we're going to stay alert and protect ourselves from the wrong kinds of voices. In fact, almost the first story in Scripture records just such a battle. God tells Adam and Eve to refrain from eating the forbidden fruit. But then a conversation with the serpent ensues, and they choose to listen to the serpent rather than God. They eat the fruit and are expelled from the garden. We are all familiar with how subtle the whisperings of temptation can be.

When we speak about the Holy Spirit, or the Spirit of God, we are speaking of God's active work in our lives; of God's way of leading us, guiding us, forming and shaping us; of God's power and presence to comfort and encourage us and to make us the people God wants us to be. The Spirit is the voice of God whispering, wooing, and beckoning us. And in listening to *this* voice and being shaped by *this* power, we find that we become most fully and authentically ourselves.

The word *spirit* shows up about 500 times in the Bible. In the Old Testament the Hebrew word usually translated as "spirit" is *ruach*. In the New Testament the Greek word is *pneuma*. Both words have multiple meanings including breath, air, and wind in addition to spirit, and translators have to use the context in which the word is found to determine which English word is closest to the original meaning. The translators don't always agree.

In the Old Testament, *ruach* is said to be what gives life to each human being. In several instances the Spirit is clearly seen as the source of creative and artistic gifts. Sometimes the OT teaches that the Spirit is the source of superhuman strength (think Samson) or wisdom (Solomon) or leadership (Joshua or Moses). It was God's Spirit that "rested on" or was "in" or "came over" the judges, great warriors, and leaders of ancient Israel. But, while the Spirit in the OT is often described as empowering and giving special gifts and abilities, the Spirit's most frequent work is in ensuring that God's voice is heard, so that God's purposes and will can be conveyed.

One of the most familiar examples is found in Isaiah 61:1 which Jesus quotes in his first sermon in his hometown of Nazareth: "The Lord God's spirit is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor." The prophet Ezekiel records God saying, "I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws." God's Spirit is at work to guide God's people and influence them to do God's will.

In the OT God's Spirit works primarily through Israel's leaders—guiding, influencing and speaking through them to work for God's ends. In the New Testament, the Spirit plays a different role, and we get a prophetic glimpse of that role in Joel 2:28 which looks ahead to the early church's experience of the Holy Spirit. There we read God saying, "I will pour out my spirit upon everyone; your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions."

Joel anticipates a key shift that takes place between the Old Testament and the New, as the Spirit moved from working through the remarkable and gifted leaders of Israel to working through unremarkable and ordinary people, people just like you and me.

Compared to the 80 or 90 references to the Spirit in the OT, the NT explodes with experiences of God's Spirit. It starts in the stories of both Jesus' and John the Baptist's conceptions in Luke's Gospel and continues through the pages of Acts, as the Spirit falls upon all believers. Jesus calls the Spirit the *paraclete*. In legal circles the word described an advocate for the defense, what we would call a defense attorney, whose job was to stand alongside the accused. Outside the judicial system, it was used to describe those who came alongside people who were hurting, to hold and comfort them, and we see all these words—"advocate," "comforter," and "helper"—translated for *paraclete* in the NT.

Before his death, Jesus told his disciples that he would not leave them alone but would send the Spirit. The Spirit is God's imminent presence and power working in us. The Spirit does for us what the Spirit did for those of old: empowering us, giving us gifts and abilities to help others and to serve God; leading and guiding us. The Spirit uses us and speaks through us.

Just before Jesus left this earth, he told his followers to wait in Jerusalem for the Spirit's coming: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8) Shortly after, on the Jewish feast of Pentecost, the Spirit did arrive, coming as a rushing, violent wind. Don't miss the connection from what happened in Jerusalem to the creation story in Genesis. There God breathed into and filled the man and woman, animating them and giving them life. In Acts, God breathes upon Jesus' followers and fills them and makes them new. This is the re-creation of humanity by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Jack Levison, professor of OT at Perkins School of Theology, described the biblical picture of the Holy Spirit this way: “The spirit was a force to be reckoned with, an impulse to which mere humans capitulated, a source of daily breath and an uncontrollable outside power.” (from *Fresh Air*) The Spirit not only *was* a force to be reckoned with; the Spirit *is* and *continues* to be that kind of force. Which begs the question: are we experiencing that kind of spiritual power in *our* lives? Too many Christians live Spirit-deficient lives, a bit like someone who is sleep-deprived, nutrient-deprived, or oxygen-deprived. Without the Spirit, our lives are rather anemic as we try living out our faith by our own power and wisdom.

So, let me ask you, what are the voices you listen to, and what are the powers that shape your life? There are voices that would lead us to give in to hate, indifference, desire, pride, infidelity, selfishness, greed or despair. But when we listen to the voice of the Spirit and open ourselves to the Spirit’s active work in our lives, we find that we are led to a very different place and to become very different people.

The Spirit convicts us and quickens our conscience when we’re doing wrong. The Spirit, through persistent nudges, urges us to act selflessly in our care for others. The Spirit makes us long to be more than we are at the present and to become more fully the people God intends us to be. St. Paul describes the Spirit’s work and its impact on our lives as the “fruit of the Spirit”: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. How different this is from the fruit my own heart and the culture around me, tends to produce in my life.

Are you aware of the Spirit at work in you? That flash of insight that comes to you that you’d never thought of before? That is often the work of the Spirit. Those moments when you feel the presence of God, that sense of peace or warmth or love that supercedes your circumstances? That’s the Spirit. Those days you hear a sermon or a song or read something and you think, “that was exactly what I needed to hear. It’s like it was written just for me today”—that’s the Spirit.

We sometimes forget, or perhaps we have never been taught, that we are to actively ask for and seek the Holy Spirit’s presence in our lives. Now, certainly, God’s Spirit is already present in us. But, we can either welcome, participate and yield to the Spirit, or we can resist. We can choose to ignore God’s still, small voice, and if we do that repeatedly and over a period of time, eventually we will develop such spiritual deafness that we won’t even recognize God’s voice any more.

I routinely pray for God's Spirit to move in my heart and life. I pray for the Spirit to give me wisdom and discernment that I will hear and receive what God wants to say to me. We can all pray like that. And, we can also pray like that for our church. Every Sunday at 9:30, whoever wants to come meets in the church library to pray specifically for Calvary and for that morning's worship. Almost without exception, each week someone or other prays for the Spirit to come and be present in our worship, to come with power that we might experience God our midst. That is a powerful prayer and one I believe God loves to honor. I also believe the worship we experience each week is due in large part to our praying for the Spirit's work during this hour. We'd love to have you join us anytime.

So, what voices will you listen to today? I invite you to listen to the voice of God's Spirit, to ask the Spirit to be at work in you, whether you are needing comfort, guidance, courage, or you're need to be confronted about an area that needs repentance. In fact, we're going to close the sermon time by praying together to the Spirit. You'll find the prayer printed in your bulletin and I invite you to locate it now:

Come Holy Spirit, I need you. Breath of God, fill me wholly and completely. Form and shape me into the person you want me to be. Lead me to do what you want me to do. Empower me and use me; speak to me and through me. Produce your fruit in me. Help me listen to your voice above all other voices that clamor for my attention. Come, Holy Spirit, I need you. Hear our prayer, O God, for Jesus' sake. Amen.