

IMAGES OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

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THIS IS THE FIRST OF A THREE-PART BIBLE STUDY ON IMAGES OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

Within the Christian faith, we believe in the Holy Trinity; that, in some mysterious way, God is three in one. Most people find it easiest to picture Jesus Christ, because he lived on earth as God in human flesh. Many people manage to picture God as Father, because we all have some concept of human fathers. It is much harder to picture God the Holy Spirit, so within scripture God has given different images to help us understand and experience his Spirit. The main biblical images of God's Spirit are Fire, Wind, Breath, Dove and Oil. This study will focus on Fire, and some of the other images will be the focus of subsequent studies.

We are starting with Fire because you will receive this magazine near to Pentecost, when we celebrate tongues of fire coming upon the followers of Jesus Christ, and all of them being filled with the Holy Spirit. Within the Bible there are numerous others references to the fire of God.

- Where in the Bible do we read about the fire of God? Consider whether or not these are references to the Holy Spirit.

In Exodus 3, we read about Moses and the burning bush. In the hot wilderness, bushes could spontaneously combust. Moses noticed that this bush kept on blazing. Was this God's Spirit blazing away to get Moses' attention? Just after Moses had led the Israelites out of Egypt, we read in Exodus 13:21-22 about the pillars of cloud and fire. Could this have been the fire of God's Spirit present with them during their wanderings in the wilderness?

- In Matthew 3:11, John the Baptist prophesied that Jesus 'will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.' How is this prophesy being fulfilled today?

Read Acts 2:1-47

Pentecost was a Jewish Festival which took place 50 days after Passover, and was also known as the Feast of Weeks or Harvest, and was a kind of harvest festival. Jews from the surrounding nations flocked to Jerusalem for this annual festival, which is why so many countries are listed in verses 9-11. God's timing was excellent; the fire of his Spirit blazed when people from so many different places were gathered together.

In v. 1, we read 'they were all together'. This could mean the eleven, plus Matthias, or more likely the 120 mentioned in Acts 1:15. Back in 1:8, they had heard Jesus promise them the power of the Holy Spirit to enable them to witness. 1:14 tells us that 'They all joined together constantly in prayer...'. It is very likely that they prayed for the power of the Holy Spirit.

- Jesus' promise of power still stands. In what ways could you and others within your church seek more Holy Spirit fire?

When the believers came together on the Day of Pentecost, they heard what sounded like a violent wind, which filled the house. '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.' Jesus baptised them with the Holy Spirit and with fire, fulfilling the prophecy given through John the Baptist.

In Acts 1:8 Jesus promised them power to witness, and after being filled with the Holy Spirit, they began to witness. The excitement caused a crowd to gather, and those from over a dozen different countries heard these Galileans speaking in other languages. It wasn't gobbledygook, for we read, 'we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues'. Whilst I believe that the primary purposes of the gift of tongues

is to praise God, to intercede and/or to give a message which needs interpreting, sometimes people hear the wonders of God being proclaimed in their own language, and this has resulted in their salvation and healings.

Perhaps what matters more than their speaking in tongues is that they were 'declaring the wonders of God'. Jesus had promised them power to witness, and once filled with God's Spirit, they witnessed to those around them. The fire of the Spirit gave them a passion to proclaim the gospel. On 24 May 1738, John Wesley's heart was strangely warmed, and this gave to him a burning desire to evangelise. Receiving the fire of God's Spirit gives us a passion to share God's Good News.

At Pentecost, and ever since, outpourings of God's Spirit are welcomed by some and rejected by others. That has been the case throughout the life of the Methodist movement. At Pentecost, some asked 'What does this mean? Some, however, made fun of them' (2:12-13). In the gospels there are numerous instances of Peter leaping into action, and often putting his foot in it. Being filled with the Spirit hasn't changed his impetuous character, but now God's Spirit is guiding his words. He explains that what is happening is the fulfilment of Joel 2:28-30, the outpouring of God's Spirit upon his people. Even though Peter was probably aware that this was in fulfilment of Jesus' promises, he started with something that would resonate with his Jewish audience, one of the Old Testament prophets.

- When you have opportunities to witness to others, how can you listen more clearly to where God's Spirit wants you to start your evangelism?

After starting with Joel, Peter then spoke about Jesus' life, ministry, death and resurrection. He then linked this back into the Jewish scriptures by quoting part of a Psalm, and then spoke about some of David's words being fulfilled through the resurrection of Jesus, their Messiah. Peter started where his listeners were, and then soon brought Jesus into the conversation. God's Spirit can help us to know how and when to bring Jesus into conversations.

Resurrection was a contentious topic within Judaism; the Pharisees believed in resurrection, but the Sadducees didn't. Peter wasn't afraid to speak about this touchy issue because he now knew for sure that resurrection was a reality. Verse 32 reads: 'God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact.' Declaring that they had seen the risen Jesus gave an invitation to the crowd, to ask any of them about what they had seen. Personal testimony continues to be a powerful way to give witness to the reality of God.

Trinity Sunday comes right after Pentecost, and will be 4 June this year. I like to preach on Trinity Sunday, and have often shared something about my experience of each person of the Trinity. I am also willing to share that I don't understand how God is three in one, yet I accept this mystery. On occasions I have used v33 as my text.



- What can you glean from v. 33 about the person and work of the Holy Trinity?

The fire of God's Spirit wasn't just blazing in the followers of Jesus, he was also igniting something within the gathering crowd. In v. 37 we read that the people were cut to the heart and asked, 'What shall we do?' Peter replied with such wisdom that it must have come from the Spirit. He told people to repent and be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins, and that they would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Even though Peter had been one of Jesus' closest three disciples, he recognised that Jesus' forgiveness was also available to all those gathered before him, providing they repented of their sin and believed that Jesus was their Messiah. Every one of them could also receive the same gift of the Spirit. (It wasn't until Acts 10 that Peter realised that this was for Gentiles as well as Jews.)

In v. 39 Peter explains that the promise of the Spirit is also 'for all who are far off'. That includes Jews who were dispersed across various nations as well as Gentiles, and also includes us, almost 20 centuries later. The fire of God's Spirit wants to burn brightly within each Christian and within every church today.

In v. 41 we read that around 3,000 people accepted Peter's Spirit-inspired message, and were baptised. The fire of God's Spirit coming upon the 120 believers blazed so brightly that the church immediately grew to over 3,000 people.'

- Over the past 2,000 years, what other occurrences have there been of the fire of God's Spirit falling afresh? What have been the results?

The final verses of Acts 2 show that within the early church there was devotion to the apostles teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Miracles were common, people shared their possessions, they praised God, enjoyed favour from other people, 'And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.'

- What aspects of the early church are present within your church? How could you facilitate some of those traits increasing within your church?

I draw this Bible study towards a close by quoting some words from Paul, 'Do not put out the Spirit's fire' (1 Thessalonians 5:19). Within our individual lives and within our churches, it is all too easy to put out the Spirit's fire, or even just to let the fire die down. If/when this happens,

'What shall we do?' (2:37). We can repent of our sin, renew our trust in Jesus Christ, and seek the rekindling of God's Spirit. In Malachi 3:2-4 we read about the Lord being like a refiner's fire, and the fire of God's Spirit has a purifying effect upon our lives and our churches. May we, and our churches, have the Spirit blazing within us, purifying us, giving us the passion to declare the wonders of God, and may we witness the Lord adding to the number of those being saved.

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O GOD OF BURNING, CLEANSING FLAME

William Booth

O God of burning, cleansing flame:
Send the fire!

Your blood-bought gift today we claim:

Send the fire today!

Look down and see this waiting host,

And send the promised Holy Ghost;

We need another Pentecost!

Send the fire today!

Send the fire today!

God of Elijah, hear our cry:

Send the fire!

And make us fit to live or die:

Send the fire today!

To burn up every trace of sin,

To bring the light and glory in,

The revolution now begin!

Send the fire today!

Send the fire today!

It's fire we want, for fire we plead:
Send the fire!

The fire will meet our every need:

Send the fire today!

For strength to always do what's right,

For grace to conquer in the fight,

For power to walk the world in white:

Send the fire today!

Send the fire today!

To make our weak hearts strong and brave:

Send the fire!

To live, a dying world to save:

Send the fire today!

Oh, see us on your altar lay,

We give our lives to you today,

So crown the offering now we pray:

Send the fire today!

Send the fire today!

Send the fire today!

*William Booth (1829-1912)
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