

DOCTRINE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Holy Spirit and the Old Testament Saint

Lesson 19

As New Testament believers we enjoy the permanent abiding presence and help of the Holy Spirit. Ezekiel the prophet predicted in **Ezek. 36:27** that when the new covenant was enacted, God would, “*put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my Statutes.*” The new covenant promised something far better than what Old Testament believers already possessed. Yet some have assumed that since the new covenant promised the Holy Spirit abiding presence, that the Old Testament believers had no assistance from the Holy Spirit at all. Yet we see in Old Testament saints, and even unbelievers at times, empowered by the Holy Spirit to perform certain tasks. *But this does not mean the Holy Spirit didn’t assist believers in an ongoing basis.* How did the Holy Spirit work in the lives of Old Testament believers? What part did the Holy Spirit play in the salvation of Old Testament saints? What part did the Holy Spirit play in the process of sanctification of the Old Testament saints? In this lesson we consider the Holy Spirit’s ongoing role in the lives of Old Testament believers.

I. THOUGHTS CONCERNING THE HOLY SPIRIT AND OLD TESTAMENT SAINTS

- A. Was the Holy Spirit an ongoing part of every believer’s life in the Old Testament from spiritual birth onward?
- B. The New Testament teaches that believers are born again by the Holy Spirit. Was that the experience of Old Testament believers as well?¹
- C. The New Testament makes it clear that those who do not have the Holy Spirit cannot understand the Word of God (**I Cor. 2:14**). What about Old Testament believers?
- D. **Rom. 8** goes into great detail discussing the contrast between the flesh and the Spirit, noting that those who are without the Spirit cannot please God. Were Old Testament believers “in the flesh” or “in the Spirit?” If they were “in the Spirit” how does that differ from what New Testament believers have today? If they were in the flesh and yet able to please God?
- E. The New Testament makes multiple statements about the necessity of the Holy Spirit in the believer’s life. Has God’s standards changed between Testaments? Did God change what He required between the Old and New Testaments or did He merely explain in the New Testament what the Holy Spirit was doing in the Old Testament all along?

¹ See Walt Kaiser, *Towards Rediscovering the Old Testament*, pg. 136 for a discussion of the Holy Spirit’s role in the salvation of Old Testament believers.

II. APPARENT PARADOXES CONCERNING THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE OLD TESTAMENT SAINT

- A. Some have assumed that since the prophet Ezekiel predicted the promised indwelling of the Holy Spirit and Jesus in the New Testament did the same, that therefore the Holy Spirit did not assist or indwell people in the Old Testament era. This is a false assumption. While there are differences between the Holy Spirit's work in the Old and New Testaments, people in both eras were "indwelt." John Walvoord notes:

Further references to this same operation of the Spirit [indwelling] are not difficult to find. The tailors who made the garments for the priests are said to have been "filled with the spirit of wisdom" (**Ex. 28:3**). Of Bezaleel and Aholiab, fine craftsmen who helped build the Tabernacle, it is said, "I have filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship" (**Ex. 31:3; cf. 35:30-35**). The seventy elders who assisted Moses were indwelt by the Holy Spirit (**Num. 11:17, 25**). Joshua is described as "a man in whom is the Spirit" (**Num. 27:18**). In the times of the judges, some of the leaders raised up to deliver Israel were filled with the Spirit: Othniel (**Judg. 3:10**), Gideon (**Judg. 6:34**), Jephthah (**Judg. 11:29**), and Samson (**Judg. 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14**). A. B. Simpson would add Deborah to the list, an illustration of a woman leader no doubt indwelt by the Holy Spirit (cf. **Judg. 4:4 ff.**). The Holy Spirit indwelt both Saul and David (**1 Sam. 10:9-10; 16:13**). The prophet Daniel was indwelt by the Holy Spirit (**Dan. 4:8; 5:11-14: 6:3**). No doubt all the prophets were indwelt by the Holy Spirit, though this was not necessarily essential to their ministry. From these specific instances and inferences which may be fairly drawn in other cases, the fact that the Holy Spirit indwelt some saints in the Old Testament can be conclusively established.²

Walvoord goes on to note that several unique qualities distinguish the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament in contrast to what New Testament believers experience today.

1. First, the Holy Spirit indwelt people with no apparent reference to their spiritual status. Both believers and unbelievers were indwelt.
2. Second, only a few people in the Old Testament seemed to experience the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, unlike the church where each member is indwelt.
3. Third, also unlike the New Testament, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament was temporary, not permanent.³

²John Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit*, (Grand Rapids: Van Kampen Press, 1966), 71-72.

³Ibid, 72

B. Three Key Texts Concerning the Promise of the Holy Spirit

1. **John 7:37-39** Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If any man is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. "He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water.'" But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

This text is the most difficult text to understand in light of the Holy Spirit's work in the lives of Old Testament saints and is commented on below.

2. **John 14:16-17** "And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you, and will be in you.

This verse clearly says the Holy Spirit has been "with" the apostles all along.

3. **John 16:7** "But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper shall not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you.

The context, both before and after the above text, mentions Jesus' promise to remember what He spoke to them. The immediate near context talks about how the Holy Spirit will aid the disciples by convicting the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment.

Out of the three texts above, only one poses an apparent obstacle to the view that the Holy Spirit was actively involved in the lives of every Old Testament believer i.e., **John 7:37-39**. Yet, there are many texts which attest to the Holy Spirit's presence and work in the life of Old Testament saints. How do we deal with this apparent paradox? George Smeaton, in his classic work *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, has said concerning **John 7:37-39**:

He does not mean that the Spirit did not yet exist, — for all Scripture attests His eternal pre-existence, — nor that His regenerating efficacy was still unknown, — for countless millions had been regenerated by His power since the first promise in Eden, — but that these operations of the Spirit had been but an anticipation of the atoning death of Christ rather than a GIVING [as happened at Pentecost]. The apostle speaks comparatively, not absolutely, as is always done when the old and the new economy are contrasted.⁴

⁴George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, pg. 49.

What Smeaton goes on to clarify, is that the Holy Spirit was present and active in the lives of Old Testament saints in anticipation of the Holy Spirit's coming at Pentecost after Christ's death. He says Pentecost was when God fulfilled his promise to send the Holy Spirit (**Joel 2:28**).⁵ What we see in the New Testament is that believers are baptized into the body of Christ, a new entity i.e. the church, by the Spirit (**I Cor. 12:13**). The loss of Christ's physical presence would be replaced by a spiritual presence of the Spirit in the life of ever believer after Pentecost. All believers would be baptized into Christ's body, empowered, sanctified, convicted, illumined, sealed, etc., by the Holy Spirit.

III. SCRIPTURAL PROOF OF THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE OLD TESTAMENT SAINT

A. Holy Spirit Restrained Sin – Gen. 6:3 cf. II Thess. 2:7

Gen. 6:3	II Thess. 2:7
3 Then the Lord said, "My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh; nevertheless his days shall be one hundred and twenty years."	7 For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. [Is the one who restrains the Holy Spirit?]

B. Holy Spirit Was Given to at Least Some – I Sam. 11:6 and I Sam. 16:14 cf. I Sam. 16:13 and Psal. 51:11

The Spirit Comes Upon Saul I Sam. 11:6	The Spirit Departs from Saul I Sam. 16:14	The Spirit Comes Upon David I Sam. 16:13	David Asks that God Not Remove His Spirit Psa. 51:11
Then the Spirit of God came upon Saul mightily when he heard these words, and he became very angry.	Now the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord terrorized him.	13 Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. And Samuel arose and went to Ramah.	[David is praying] Do not cast me away from Your presence And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.

⁵ Ibid.

C. Sin Grieved the Holy Spirit – Isa. 63:10 cf. Eph. 4:30

Isa. 63:10	Eph. 4:30
But they rebelled And grieved His Holy Spirit; therefore He turned Himself to become their enemy, He fought against them.	Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

D. The Holy Spirit Gave Wisdom to Old Testament Believers – Gen. 41:38-40
 Then Pharaoh said to his servants, “Can we find a man like this, in whom is a divine spirit?” 39 So Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has informed you of all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you are. 40 “You shall be over my house, and according to your command all my people shall do homage; only in the throne I will be greater than you.”

E. The Holy Spirit Gave Special Skills and Abilities – Ex. 31:3 “I have filled him with the Spirit of God in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all kinds of craftsmanship, . . .

F. The Holy Spirit Gave Super Human Strength to Old Testament believers – Judges 14:5-6 Then Samson went down to Timnah with his father and mother, and came as far as the vineyards of Timnah; and behold, a young lion came roaring toward him. 6 The Spirit of the Lord came upon him mightily, so that he tore him as one tears a young goat though he had nothing in his hand; but he did not tell his father or mother what he had done.

G. The Holy Spirit Abides with Old Testament Saints – Hag. 2:5 cf. Jn. 14:17⁶

Haggai 2:5	Jn. 14:17
‘As for the promise which I made you when you came out of Egypt, My Spirit is abiding in your midst; do not fear!’	that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you.

H. The Holy Spirit Spoke Through Old Testament Believers – Matt. 10:20⁷ “For it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.

⁶Here the NASB reads “because He abides with you and will be in you.” The Greek word *meno* “abide” means to remain, stay or abide. Other early manuscripts read “because He is in you and will be in you.” Yet, the reading is awkward because it merely promises the same thing will continue. “He abides with you and will be in you” fits the context better and is probably the best translation. Yet even if one concedes that Christ is promising a future indwelling of the Holy Spirit, He is also verifying that Old Testament believers had at least a presence of the Holy Spirit to assist them.

⁷ The word “speaks” in this verse is in the present active tense.

- I. **The Holy Spirit Was Given by the Father to Old Testament Believers Who Ask – Luke 11:13⁸** “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?”
- J. **The Holy Spirit Causes Old Testament Believers to Be Born Again – John 3:1-10** 1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; 2 this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.” 3 Jesus answered and said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” 4 Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?” 5 Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. 6 “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 “Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ 8 “The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.” 9 Nicodemus said to Him, “How can these things be?” 10 Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?”
- K. What we learn from the texts above is that the Holy Spirit was very active in the lives of Old Testament believers and even unbelievers at times. While the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was unique in relation to believers in the church, we should not let that fact cause us to assume falsely that the Holy Spirit did not have a wide variety of ministries in the lives of Old Testament believers.

IV. **THEOLOGICAL EXTRAPOLATIONS AND INFERENCES CONCERNING THE HOLY SPIRIT AND OLD TESTAMENT BELIEVERS**

- A. The New Testament is clear that you are born again by the Holy Spirit (**Jn. 3:5-8; Tit. 3:5**). The Holy Spirit is the member of the Trinity, who illumines, draws, regenerates, and works to bring sinners to repentance and faith. Since Jesus told Nicodemus, an Old Testament believer living in the Old Testament era, that he should know this, it is reasonable to believe that Old Testament saints were born again by the Holy Spirit just as New Testament believers are today.
- B. The Scriptures also teach you are sanctified by the Holy Spirit (**Rom. 15:15; I Cor. 6:11**). The Holy Spirit is the power or agent that causes us to grow in godliness. Were Old Testament believers saved by the Spirit and then abandoned by the Holy Spirit to live the rest of their lives in the flesh? Or were

⁸ The word “give” in this verse is in the present active tense.

they saved by the Holy Spirit and then assisted by the Holy Spirit in some way that is less than what New Testament believers have, but enough to enable them to please God? **Rom. 8:5-8** says those who are in the flesh “*cannot please God*” and “*that it is impossible for them to do so.*” Though the evidence is not conclusive, we might assume, based on what the New Testament says, that Old Testament believers did have the Holy Spirit’s assistance to grow in godliness.

- C. The New Testament makes it clear that believers understand the Word of God by the illumination ministry of the Holy Spirit (**I Jn. 2:27**). In fact Paul goes as far to say that those who do not have the Holy Spirit “*cannot understand the things of God*” (**I Cor. 2:10-14**). This raises a question – what about Old Testament saints? Was it impossible for Old Testament saints to understand the Scriptures? Have things changed between the Old Testament and the New Testament? Could Old Testament saints understand the Word of God without the assistance of the Holy Spirit or did they need the Holy Spirit’s help just as New Testament believers do (**I Cor. 2:14**)?
- D. The New Testament teaches that believers are “*sealed by the Holy Spirit as a pledge/guarantee of our inheritance*” (**Eph. 1:13; 4:30**). What about Old Testament saints? Were Old Testament saints in peril of losing their salvation or their spiritual inheritance because they had no guarantee or pledge? If not, then why do New Testament saints need the Holy Spirit to function in this capacity? Or does the Holy Spirit in the life of a New Testament believer give added assurance which the Old Testament believer didn’t have, though their salvation was secure?

V. **ERRORS CONCERNING THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE OLD TESTAMENT SAINT**

- A. Error – The Holy Spirit did not work in the lives of Old Testament saints.
- B. Error – The Holy Spirit only came upon people for temporary empowerment in the Old Testament.
- C. Error – The Holy Spirit was not present in the lives of Old Testament saints.
- D. Error – The Old Testament saints were saved, sanctified, illumined, and sealed apart from the Holy Spirit.
- E. Error – Old Testament believers were not indwelt by the Holy Spirit.
- F. Error – The Holy Spirit’s ministry to Old Testament believers is identical to that of New Testament believers.

- G. Error – The Holy Spirit permanently indwelt Old Testament believers just as he does New Testament believers in the church.

VI. CONCLUSION

The Scripture teaches that the Holy Spirit, being God, is always present. The Scriptures also affirm that the Holy Spirit temporarily empowered people in the Old Testament for certain tasks. The Holy Spirit was “with” and “in” Old Testament saints but they were not permanently indwelt or baptized by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ. Like the New Testament era, in the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit was the agent of salvation, caused spiritual re-birth, illumined saints to the truth, and helped them grow in godliness. Thus, there was an active presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Old Testament believers and often an influence in the lives of unbelievers as well.

When the church was born at Pentecost, forming the spiritual body of Christ, all believers were “baptized” by the Holy Spirit into the spiritual body of Christ, the church. The new covenant was inaugurated by Jesus’s death. Those who were “in Him” could started to receive some of the blessings promised in the new covenant. Thus we might summarize by saying that the difference between the work of the Holy Spirit in the Old and New Testament eras is that New Testament believers are assisted by the Holy Spirit in greater ways, are baptized by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ, and enjoy the permanently indwelling of the Holy Spirit as a source of victorious living and as a pledge of their future inheritance.