

THE HOLY SPIRIT in the Old and New Testaments

I wonder if you have ever known a person you loved but did not really understand? You thought you knew him or her, but then he would do something unexpected. You knew he could be trusted, that he was a person of integrity and would keep his word. Nevertheless, this person you thought you knew would sometimes show you depths to his character that you didn't realise were there. And as your knowledge and love for this person grew, he became more endearing.

In this study on the Holy Spirit, we find something similar. If we were to begin with the Book of Acts, we would certainly be impressed by the Spirit's behaviour, and rightly so, but we might also be puzzled. The Spirit has the pivotal role in establishing the Church, which is the fellowship of believers made possible by Jesus' death and resurrection. Filling these believers, He empowers, sends and guides them every step of the way, but one realises after a while that the Spirit is always way ahead of them, catching them by surprise, delighting but also unsettling them – even, at times, causing them alarm. He takes them to places they never planned to go and by circumstances they would never have chosen (Acts 8:1-4). The Spirit opens His arms wide to people they thought God didn't like while showing no favouritism to those they thought God Favoured (10:34-35). The Spirit's power proves greater and His purpose bigger than they imagined (15:12-19). When the elders look into the Scriptures the Spirit inspired, they find He is being true to His Word – but nevertheless He can leave them breathless. He sets a challenging pace!

We therefore will also go back to the Old Testament to begin our study of the person and work of the Holy Spirit. There we will explore the foundations that God laid as part of His salvation plan. The Spirit may seem hidden here but He is not absent. We will note His profound work through which He is made known and which is ongoing. We will watch God's plan unfold, so that when we come to the New Testament we will be able to appreciate more fully both the work of the Spirit in the early Church and what is 'normal' Christian experience, then and today. By following the development of God's salvation project, we will gain greater understanding of the finished structure. God is still putting into effect through His Spirit His work of salvation foretold in Scripture and achieved by Jesus. We will see the Spirit putting that work into effect before Jesus came, when He came and in the life of the believer and the Church.

The Bible leads us from creation to new creation, from promise to fulfilment. It begins with the power and majesty of God in creation and His love towards humankind. At the very time of rebellion in Eden, God announces rescue and restored relationship that would be entirely His initiative and His doing. **Promise will build on promise until fulfilment comes in Jesus.** If at times you wonder where the Holy Spirit is in all this, remember that His role is first to communicate and then to put into effect (but usually behind the scenes) God's plan of salvation through Jesus. Even in the New Testament, where His presence is more noticeable, He is directing our attention away from Himself to Jesus, whom He places on centre stage (John 16:14).

God is the one and only God – but He is experienced throughout history in three distinct ways: Father, Son and Spirit. This the Church calls the doctrine of the Trinity. The third person is usually identified in the Old Testament by the title "the Spirit of God". In the New Testament He is better known as the Holy Spirit or "Spirit of Holiness". That tells us a lot. The Spirit is holy. He is trustworthy. He will always keep His Word. He will never be anything but righteous and faithful to His promises. But that does not mean that He will always be predictable. Sometimes He will take your breath away, like the 'oohs' and 'aahs' of watching a magnificent fireworks display. Sometimes we will be filled with silent awe, as if coming over the crest of a hill and seeing a magnificent view spread before us. Sometimes He will produce in us a healthy fear, like an

approaching storm, that motivates us to close the windows and bring the children inside. Sometimes we will simply be lost in the wonder of God's grace.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for spirit is *ruach*, which also means wind or breath. Where the breath of God is present, there the Spirit is. Where the mighty wind of God blows over the primeval world, dries up the flood for Noah, parts the sea for Israel or comes upon the disciples of Jesus in power at Pentecost, there the Spirit is. Nevertheless, **the Spirit is not an impersonal force. He is God personally present.** The presence of the Spirit signals the presence of God. He must be given to us by God if we are to receive Him at all. He shares all the attributes of God. He is personal, eternal, unchanging, present everywhere (omnipresent), all powerful (omnipotent), all knowing (omniscient). And one of the most precious Bible truths for us as Christians is that the Spirit of Jesus, God's Holy Spirit, lives within us.

This study won't contain everything the Bible has to say on the Spirit's person and work. It will serve as an introduction and overview. For some of us this study will bring new order to our understanding of the Spirit of God. From the beginning He has brought order from chaos, the chaos of unformed matter and the chaos of sin. From the beginning God's way of salvation was already ordered and planned.

For others, this study will challenge us not to try to limit the Spirit of God. His work is always planned, always consistent with what has gone before, but is nevertheless often surprising. Each new development in the plan of salvation was built on what had gone before but each came as a complete surprise to those who received it. "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God had prepared for those who love Him" (1 Corinthians 2:9). God's love will always be stronger than we can imagine. His grace will always be bigger than our finite minds can comprehend, and the work of His Spirit will always be beyond our anticipation.

(Prepared from notes supplied to The KYB Editorial Team)