

# God's Presence

Good to see you guys again, believe it or not I'm a pastor here. Been off from preaching for about a month following the birth of our baby girl. I'll show you some photos, since that seems like a very dad thing to do... So I'm extra sleepy but here, and excited to be back teaching the Scriptures with you guys.

We're kicking off a series today called *Holy Ghost Revival: Recovering the Practical Power of the Spirit*. So this is a series all about the Holy Spirit. Now I realize when I start talking about the Holy Spirit, there are probably a couple different types of reactions to that in the room. For some of you, you might be thinking "*finally*—we're going to talk about the one thing that matters." For others of you, you might be thinking something much more like "oh man, I was really starting to like this church—and now y'all are about to get all weird on me."

And I think those responses, really, are reflective of the two different "camps" in the Church today in regards to the Holy Spirit. On one side you have the camp that is usually *very* comfortable with talk of the Holy Spirit: these are generally the people who have spent some time in Pentecostal traditions, Assembly of God, Church of God—church traditions like that. Generally speaking these people are very dialed into the Spirit, very *aware* of the Spirit, and very *desirous* of the Spirit's work. And then on the other side, you have the Churches that are somewhat *less* comfortable with talk of the Holy Spirit. And by that I don't necessarily mean they don't *believe* in the Spirit or *are against* the Spirit—I just mean he tends to get buried a little bit. The Spirit, and the role of the Spirit, and gifts of the Spirit, in these churches, just don't get much airtime. These are generally your Southern Baptists, your Presbyterians, your Lutherans—church traditions like that. I once heard somebody say that the way those churches treat the Spirit is kind of like a crazy uncle: "they claim him, they know him—they just keep him in a corner and only interact with him when they have to." Which as someone who grew up Southern Baptist, I thought was hilarious. Because that's *precisely* what I did.

Now, one thing I love about *our* church specifically is that we have people who come from all different traditions. We have people who would very much say they come from a *pro*-Holy Spirit church tradition, and people who would say they come from a *not-so-pro*-Holy Spirit tradition. And, we have plenty of people who would say that prior to being here, they didn't really come from any church tradition *at all*. And I love all of that so much—I think it's really healthy that we have people from all sorts of different backgrounds. But my goal in this series is going to be to challenge *all of us* a bit on our

preconceived notions of the Holy Spirit, myself included. **My hope is that all of us will be challenged to either 1) consider some things we haven't wanted to consider before, 2) be challenged to *reconsider* some things we might've misunderstood, or perhaps both.** My goal is that by the end, I'd have a lot of you saying I went too far and a lot of you saying I didn't go far enough. If I've done that, I think I will have achieved what I wanted to achieve.

So here's where we're headed with the series as a whole [slide]. The next two weeks will be "intro" weeks, talking about God's Presence this week, and God's Power next week. Then we'll spend a week looking at how the Spirit works through our community, a week on how the Spirit forms our character, and then three straight weeks on the gifts from the spirit—what a lot of people call "spiritual gifts." So we're going in on this series...hope you guys are ready.

That being said, we're going to start things off today and next week very simply by just discussing **who the Holy Spirit is**. ~~I certainly don't want to launch into a topic like this one assuming that we're all on the same page about what we're talking about when we say "the Holy Spirit."~~ Quite a few scholars have noted that there are sort of two *pieces* to who the Spirit is: **God's presence**, and **God's power**.<sup>1</sup> So borrowing that framework, this week, we're going to talk about the Spirit as God's *presence*, and next week we'll talk about the Spirit as God's *power*. Sound good?

So in order to talk about God's *presence*, I want to take us, over the next fifteen to twenty minutes, from the front to the back cover of the bible. So get comfortable. This is what happens when I don't preach for a month—I come back wanting to preach through the whole bible. So this is an audacious goal to be sure, but I truly believe that this is the best way to get an understanding of the Holy Spirit as God's *presence*. So if you will, turn with me in your bibles to Genesis 1. Today we're going to cover a lot of different passages, and we're going to move pretty quickly through them. So if you consider yourself to be an expert level bible-flipper, you can turn to each one with me. But if not, we are going to put the text of each passage on the screen. But either way, we'll start with Genesis 1.

So there are a number of ways, I think, to sum up the story of the bible. But I would argue one of the better ways to describe it is as the story **God's never-ending desire to**

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<sup>1</sup> The originator of this language, as far as I can tell, is a guy named Gordon Fee. He wrote an incredible book about the Holy Spirit called *God's Empowering Presence*, which is ~1000 pages long. If you want to get the basic gist of it, he has an *abridged* version of that book called *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*.

be with his people. And *that* is a storyline that is *incomplete* without the Holy Spirit. The giving of the Holy Spirit is the culmination of God's never-ending desire to be with his people. And today I want to try and show you that by taking a look at the high points of that story arc in the bible. So let's take a look at Genesis 1, v. 1 (no literally, we're going cover to cover through the bible):

*[1] In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth [which was an ancient way of saying "everything." God created everything there is]. [2] The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the **Spirit of God** was **hovering over** the face of the waters.*

So **from the very beginning of the story of the bible, the Spirit of God is present.** Here, it describes him as "hovering over" the waters. The Spirit is there before anything else is. And he's *everywhere*. And if you know the story, what happens next is that God creates *everything*. And part of that everything is humanity, represented by Adam and Eve. So **when the story begins, Adam and Eve have constant, unhindered access to God's presence.** So the feeling that you and I sometimes have, when we feel distant from God? In the beginning Adam & Eve never knew that feeling—let that sink in. And God gives them access to anything and everything in creation—save one *tree*, called the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. He tells them the only thing they aren't allowed to do is eat from *that tree*. And so of course, they *do*. And from that moment on, what the Scriptures call *sin* enters the human story. Now, there are all sorts of implications of sin entering the story that we don't have time to get into today, but I want us to see just *one* of them.

Skip down to Genesis 3, v. 24. As a result of human beings sinning against God, here's *one* thing that happens:

*He [being God himself] **drove out** the man [and that language is collective there, so really it's "the man **and** the woman"], and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.*

Now, I know there might be some odd-sounding imagery in there, but the gist of it is that **humanity at this point loses the unhindered access to the presence of God.** Sin has broken the perfect, constant relationship Adam and Eve had with God. There is now a separation—a barrier—between them and God's presence. That's what the "cherubim and flaming sword" are all about. But if you think about it, this is just how *all* relationships

work. When someone sins against you, wrongs you, breaks your trust in some way, there is nearly always a *separation* between you and them as a result. Until something is done about the wrong, there is a *distance* between you. There's a *guardedness* there. There might not be a cherubim and flaming sword to *represent it*, but there's still a *barrier*. And so now, there is this *separation*, this *chasm* between humanity and God.

But God doesn't *leave things* that way for long. Remember: the bible is the story *God's never-ending desire to be with his people*. So God formulates a *plan* to be *with* his people once again, despite their sin. For that, let's go to Exodus 25. **In this passage, God is going to unpack how exactly he plans to be with his people once again.** It involves God's people constructing, essentially, a really elaborate *tent* called a "tabernacle." Take a look with me at v. 8 of chapter 25:

*[8] And let them make me a **sanctuary** [which just means "sacred place"], that I may  **dwell in their midst**. Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the **tabernacle**, and of all its **furniture**, so you shall make it.*

This tent apparently was legit: it had *furniture* to go with it. So it was less like camping and more like glamping. So God wants his people to build a tabernacle, and a sanctuary within it, for him to " *dwell in the midst*" of his people. Now, this will help you with your bible reading: an awful lot of the time, when the bible uses the language of God *dwelling* with his people, what it's referring to is the Holy Spirit: God's means of *dwelling among* his people. So here, **God is saying that through this tent, this tabernacle, his very presence will be with his people.** And so the way it would work is that God's people, as they wandered through the desert, would essentially carry this tabernacle with them everywhere they went. It was like going camping with God. Which, side note, "camping with God" absolutely has to be the title of a bad Christian movie out there somewhere. Most likely starting Kirk Cameron. But **through this tabernacle or tent, God would reside with—dwell alongside—his people once again. The tabernacle was the dwelling place of God.**

~~And maybe that sounds super primitive to a lot of us: that they had to carry this tent around in order to be with God. But some context might help. In that day and age, the "gods" that most nations believed in were gods of certain *geographic regions*: so you had a god of the forest and a god of the plains and a god of the sea and a god of the mountains. The gods were believed to be limited to their respective geographic regions. And so if you wanted to interact with a god, you had to *go to that place to interact with it*. **But the true God—the God of Israel—desired to be with and among his people. He**~~

~~wasn't limited to one geographic region, he went wherever his people went.~~  
~~Because again, the bible is the story of God's never ending desire to be with his people.~~

Now, a little later on, in the book of 1 Kings,<sup>2</sup> the *tabernacle* evolves into something called the *temple*. Which was basically a permanent, brick-and-mortar version of the tabernacle. God's people at this point are no longer mobile—they're all in one place. So the structure itself can be established permanently in one place. Just take a look at this one verse from 1 Kings 8 with me.

*[13] I have indeed built you an exalted house, a place for you to  **dwell in forever.***"

Now once again, the word "dwell" refers to...? *The Holy Spirit*. So **the temple is now the dwelling place of God himself, via his Spirit**. Now, before we move on to the next development in this storyline, there's one other thing you need to know about the tabernacle *and* the temple. With both of them, a central piece of God's presence residing in those structures was the reality of *sacrifices*. For even a *select portion* of God's people to interact directly with God's Spirit in the tent or the temple, a variety of sacrifices would have to be made. These sacrifices were a way of communicating that you understood the *gravity* of the separation between you and God, that you didn't take it lightly or flippantly. Does that make sense?

Okay, let's keep moving. Next let's head to the *New Testament*. Some of you are like "praise the Lord—that's the part of the Bible I understand a little better." Yep, we're headed to the gospel of John, chapter 1. This is John's introduction to Jesus—but I want you to pay careful attention to the *language he uses to describe Jesus*, especially considering everything we've talked about so far. Take a look at John 1, in v. 14:

*And the Word [that's John's name for Jesus] became flesh and **dwelt among us**, and we have seen his glory [essentially, the word "glory" in the bible is a way of saying God's presence and God' beauty], glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

**John's point here is clear as day: Jesus is the new temple.** Jesus is now the epicenter of God's *presence* on planet earth. *He* is now where God's presence resides. Once you understand this, it makes sense of some otherwise confusing stuff Jesus says at times. So Jesus says at one point "you will destroy this *temple* and I will rebuild it in

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<sup>2</sup> You can specifically read about this starting in 1 Kings 8.

three days.” Everybody is confused. They’re like “Jesus, it took like fifty years to build the temple—we don’t think you’re going to rebuild it in three days.” But he’s not talking about the *old* temple—the brick and mortar one—he’s talking about the *new* one. He’s talking about his own *body*. He’s saying that his body will be destroyed on the cross, and then resurrected in three days. **And his point is that through precisely that event happening, he will open the presence of God up to inhabit not just a physical structure in one location, but to dwell in and through people who believe in him.**

There will be other times where Jesus offers people forgiveness for their sins, and the religious leaders of the day lose their *mind*. Because in *their* minds, Jesus can’t just go around offering *forgiveness* for people’s sins. There has to be *sacrifices* made for that to happen, there are proper steps to be taken at the temple before that can happen. But Jesus is saying “*I’m* the new temple. *I’m* the one that all of those steps at the temple were pointing to. The book of Hebrews makes clear that it was never actually about the sacrifices themselves—it wasn’t killing of a lamb or a goat or a bird that took away people’s sin.<sup>3</sup> Remember, the sacrifices were just a way of communicating the *gravity* of God’s presence. But now that *Jesus* is the temple, he is saying that *his* death and resurrection is the only sacrifice that is needed for the forgiveness of sin. (~~Now some of you just need to hear that today—forget the Holy Spirit stuff for the moment: some of you need to hear that Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross is the only one needed for your sin. I don’t care what you’ve done: you do not need to beat yourself up over your sin, you don’t need to punish yourself for your sin, you don’t need someone else to punish you—you need to know that Jesus’ sacrifice was enough for you.~~) And so in light of that, he forgives people, because his death makes forgiveness possible. Does that make sense? But the point here is that Jesus is now the new temple. *He* is where the presence of God resides.

But it doesn’t stop there. Go with me to 1 Corinthians 3. So Jesus has died, he’s come back from the dead, and then ascended back into heaven. And he’s commissioned this small group of people to be his representatives on planet Earth. And here’s the *implication* of all that—1 Corinthians 3, v. 16. This is Paul talking to the church in Corinth—he says:

*Do you not know that **you** are **God's temple** and that [therefore] **God's Spirit dwells in you?***

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<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 10:4 specifically.

Now, first off, you need to know that that the word “you” in that verse is *plural*. So it’s not so much saying that God’s Spirit dwells in *you*, Matt, or *you*, Madison. That’s *true* too, and it talks about that elsewhere. But *here*, it’s making the point that **God’s Spirit now dwells in us—the collective community of God**. So keep in mind that up until this point, there have been no instances where God’s presence permanently dwelled in a person other than Jesus and John the Baptist—those are the only two. Up until now, if God’s people wanted to interact with God’s presence, they had to send a representative into the tabernacle or the temple. But **now, it says God’s Spirit actually dwells in and among God’s people as a whole. We can now all be filled and inhabited by God’s Spirit**. We are all together now God’s *temple*. We all now have access to God’s Spirit.

Okay, you guys have one more passage in you before we come up for air? I hope so, I’m literally just asking you to be nice—you don’t really have a choice. Last passage: Revelation 21. Believe it or not, there’s actually plenty of stuff in Revelation that *isn’t* dragons and lakes of fire. For example, Revelation 21. This passage is describing what is going to happen at the culmination of history, when God sets all things right in the world once and for all. And here’s what it says about God’s *presence* specifically, starting in v. 1:

*And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, [and notice this] “**Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.**”*

So when all is said and done, God’s Spirit won’t just inhabit followers of Jesus as the Church, but will inhabit *all of creation* once again. There will be no person or place where God’s Spirit is not. In other words, it will be just like it was in the very beginning with Adam and Eve, when the Spirit of God “hovered over the waters.” **There will be unhindered, unrestricted access to God everywhere once again, because God will have eradicated sin and sin’s effects once and for all. At this point, God will have fully achieved and satisfied his never-ending desire to be with his people**. And he will be with us forever. That’s good news, is it not?

Alright, so that concludes our tour through the bible. You guys still alive out there? Now there’s a few reasons I wanted to show you all of that. One, **I want you to get a big picture understanding of the Spirit, before we spend the rest of this series sorting through some of the particulars of it all**. I don’t want us to miss the forest for the

trees, as it were. Two, **for those who are more *hesitant* or *skeptical* about the Holy Spirit, I want us to see that this is not a *peripheral* idea in the bible.** It's not off to the side. **The story of the entire bible, in many ways, is a story about God's Spirit.** From cover to cover, God has this never-ending desire to be with his people. And his *Spirit* is a central piece of that story. Such that **today, a living relationship with God necessarily involves the Holy Spirit.** It is not optional. Do you see that? And then third, I think all of this has a few day-to-day implications for us. So let's spend the remainder of our time, talking about what all of this means for you and me on an everyday basis. Let's highlight three of them.

### **Implication #1: It changes how we talk about God.**

I think understanding the Holy Spirit as God's presence informs how we *talk about* God's activity in the world. It changes how we talk about God. It's interesting to me to notice the different names people use for God. Some people, when they talk about God, call him "the Lord." They'll say "the Lord did this..." and "the Lord did that..." Others, and I think especially my generation and younger, will instead say "Jesus." They'll say "*Jesus* is teaching me this..." or "*Jesus* is showing me that..." Others still will say "God," and probably a variety of other names or phrases as well.

But here's what I want you to see: to be the utmost *technically correct*, when we talk about God's *active presence* in our everyday life—when we talk about something he's *currently* doing or teaching us or revealing to us—**when we talk about something God is doing currently, who we're really talking about there is the Holy Spirit.** That's who we're talking about. It's not that it's not the Lord, or that it's not Jesus, or that it's not God—they're all united in their purposes—it's just that the most *accurate* way to describe what is happening there is that it is the *Holy Spirit at work* in our lives. Am I making sense?

Now you might be thinking, "does that *really* matter? Like isn't that just semantics?" Well, yes and no. Yes, in that I don't think we need to go around being the Holy Spirit language police. I'm not saying that every time we hear someone say 'the Lord is teaching me...' we should go "mehhhh! Wrong! You should've said 'the Holy Spirit.'" That's not what I'm pushing for, on the count of how obnoxious it would be. Obnoxiousness is not a fruit of the Spirit, generally speaking.

But at the same time, here's why I do think it matters. I think **for some of us, we might be skeptical or hesitant towards the Holy Spirit because we don't realize he's who**



**we've been interacting with all along.** We don't realize the one who's been convicting us of sin for years, teaching us who God is for years, opening our eyes to the Scriptures for years. All of that is actually the Holy Spirit at work. If it is the *active presence* of God in your life, it is actually the Holy Spirit. So knowing that changes how we talk about God. And second...

## **Implication #2: It changes how we interact with God.**

Second, I think an understanding of the Holy Spirit informs how we *interact* with God. One of the most popular misperceptions of the Holy Spirit is that the Holy Spirit is a *force*. There was a recent study where self-proclaimed Christians were asked if the Holy Spirit was a person or force, and 50% of people said that he's a force. A lot of people apparently think the Holy Spirit is like the Force from Star Wars. Now I think where they might be getting that idea is that the bible *does* say that we receive *power from* the Spirit—that idea is *all over* and it's what we're going to discuss at length next week. But that being said, **the Holy Spirit is not a force—he's a person.** That's why when we talk about the Holy Spirit, we say "*he*," not "*it*." **The Holy Spirit is a living being that followers of Jesus are in relationship with.** Not a *human* being, sure—but a being nonetheless. He is a *person* that we interact with.

Now, here's why *that* matters: **I think an awful lot of us have this tendency to interact with God as if he's an *idea*, and not a *person*. I think many people think that being a Christian is about ascribing to a set of ideas about God, and really nothing more.** That becoming a Christian is simply about giving intellectual assent to a list of concepts. And I think that leads to us *interacting* with God more like he's an *idea* than he is a *person*.

For instance, this is the only explanation I can come up with for why so many people say they follow Jesus, but haven't cracked open their bible in months or years or *decades*: It's because they think that being a Christian is just about agreeing to a list of ideas about God. You can do *that* without ever needing to read your bible. It's the only explanation for why so many people say they're Christians, but haven't spoken a word to God in prayer for years. It's because they think being a Christian is just about agreeing to a set of ideas about God. You don't need to pray at all to agree to a set of *ideas*.

This is also the only explanation for why so many people say they're Christians, but have no interest whatsoever in changing the way they view sex or money or possessions or relationships to align with what Jesus *said* about those things. So you'll have people with

all these areas of their life that are very obviously at odds with how God would call us to live, but that doesn't seem to bother them all that much. Because we tend to believe that we can pick and choose which parts of our life we want the *idea* of God to *apply to*, and which parts we *don't*. That only makes sense if you think of God as an *idea*—and not as a *person*.

But think about all that *practically* for just a second. If I went around telling everybody that you and I were friends—that we had a friendship with each other—and while doing that, I never made *any effort* to spend time with you, never had any real *desire* to spend time with you, never talked to you, and never listened to anything you had to say about my life or your life or anything else—what would you say to me? You'd say “we're not friends. Not in any sense of the word.” Friendship indicates relationship, and we have no functional relationship to speak of. **Some of us have spent way too much time saying we have a relationship with God, when really all we have is intellectual assent to a set of ideas.**

*But* look straight at me as I say this: if God is a *person*, if the Holy Spirit is a *living being*—and being a Christian means living in *constant relationship* with him—none of those approaches to being a Christian actually make any sense at all. If the Holy Spirit is a *person* I am in a relationship *with*, *of course* I'm going to crack open my bible on a regular basis. Because the bible is one of the primary means this *person* uses to *speak* to me, to *interact* with me, to *teach* me. If the Holy Spirit is a *person*, *of course* I'm going to pray on a regular basis, because that is the means by which I have a *conversation* with that person. If the Holy Spirit is a *person*, *of course* my life is going to be shaped by him in some way. **An understanding of the Holy Spirit is what takes our relationship with God from agreeing to set of ideas, to a relationship with a living being.** It's one thing to say “I agree to a set of ideas about God.” It's another thing altogether to say “I have a *relationship* with God through the *Holy Spirit*.”

So listen, if you've walked in today and you're just totally caught off guard by all that—if you just feel like I pulled the rug out from underneath you: please, know that the only reason I do that is because I want you to actually *know* him. Because I want more for you than intellectual assent to a set of ideas. What's on offer for us from the God of the universe is a living, breathing *relationship* with him. What's on offer is *conversation* with God himself. What's on offer is having the very fabric of our lives shaped and affected by God himself. What's on offer is that we can live *indwelt* by the very presence of God. And that all happens through the *presence* of the Holy Spirit, made available to us through the sacrifice of Jesus. And lastly...

### **Implication #3: It gives others a way to encounter God.**

Now, this one right here gets into my heart for this series as it relates to our church. Because **the implications of knowing the Holy Spirit aren't just inward and personal. They are outward and missional.** Remember, for people in the Old Testament, generally speaking, to encounter God—they had to go to the *temple*. But then in 1 Corinthians, Paul says that *we* are the temple. The people of God, you and I, so many of the people sitting in this room right now, *we* are now the temple of God. Which means today that **for people to encounter God, they don't have to go to any particular building: they just need to encounter the *people* of God.**

So here on Sundays, when we show up to be here together—we're not just singing some songs and listening to some teaching on the bible. **We are embodying the very presence of the living God.** When we gather in homes throughout the week as LifeGroups, we're not just getting together to discuss the bible and be good friends, we are becoming an outpost for the kingdom of God to come on earth as it is in heaven. Do you see the difference there?

So let me be extremely candid with you guys. I've been a part of the inner workings of church culture for a while now, and you know what I've learned? It doesn't take the Spirit of God to gather a crowd on a Sunday morning. It really doesn't. If you put some decent musicians together, in a cool enough space, and you put somebody up on the stage that can tell some jokes and hold people's attention for a bit, you can draw a crowd. A pretty large crowd, in fact. I mean forgive me for the cynicism, but that's true, isn't it? There are churches all over the place right now that are little more than that. But I'll tell you right now, I've got no interest in doing that here. If that's all we're doing here, let's just go ahead and shut it down. If we have 100, 200, 1000 people here on a Sunday, but the Spirit of God isn't in it, I want nothing to do with it. **But—but—if we've got even a *handful* of people here who see it as their responsibility to embody the very presence of God to our city and our world, I think *then* we've got something really, really special.** And if *that's* what we're doing, people will encounter *God* here on Sundays. People will encounter *God* in our LifeGroups. *That's* what we're after here at City Church.

So what I want for each and every one of us—**what I want for our church family as a *whole*—is not just that we would be technically *Christians*, but that we would be *filled* with the joy and peace and life that the Spirit offers us.** That we would be the

embodiment of the very presence of God to the world. That we ourselves would be a *temple* of God. That through *us*, the world around us might get a glimpse of who God is and what he's capable of. And the way that happens is by God's Spirit.

So for the rest of this series, what we're going to explore the nuts and bolts of *how* we can become that sort of community, more and more, together. Today I just want to ask you, *do you want that?* Do we want that? Do we want to be a part of becoming a dwelling place for the Spirit of God here on earth?

If you do, I just want to ask you to do something very simple with me. Go ahead and put away whatever it is you've got out, close your eyes, and bow your head with me. And then all around this room this morning, if you want to see the Spirit move and work among our church family in even greater ways than he's done so far, I want to just ask you to say this simple prayer with me. Maybe with hands open in front of you, maybe with a hand lifted up in the air, whatever posture helps it resonate with you. Would you just pray with me this prayer: *Holy Spirit, come. ~~Would you move in and through us?~~*

Let me pray for us.