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The
**HOLY
SPIRIT**
in the
**NEW
TESTAMENT**

A PENTECOSTAL GUIDE



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The HOLY SPIRIT
in MATTHEW

HALLMARK OF THE KINGDOM

I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

MATTHEW 3:11 NIV

THE SPIRIT IS MENTIONED only a dozen times in Matthew. However, this low number belies its importance. The Spirit literally brackets Matthew's Gospel from beginning to end. Starting with the generative work of the Spirit in the virgin birth and continuing until the very last words of Jesus in the Great Commission, the Holy Spirit sets the agenda for Matthew's Gospel. For Matthew, there is no messianic era apart from the Spirit. Sickness, demonic oppression, and crushing poverty are no match for the in-breaking of the kingdom. This kingdom is exclusively brought to bear by the Anointed One, Jesus of Nazareth, who operates in the power of the Spirit of God.

Herein lies the hope-filled message for us as believers. Matthew's portrayal of the Spirit assures us that the heavens are not closed but open. The Spirit speaks to his people by way of revelation, dreams, prophecy, and miracles. The incarnational presence of the Spirit in Jesus creates an open interchange between Creator and creation. In this way, God's anointed Messiah brings about a Spirit-infused solidarity between heaven and earth. Even more wonderful, John the

Baptist promises that Jesus will baptize us in the Holy Spirit and fire. This means that believers are immersed in the selfsame Spirit who inaugurated, sustained, and even now carries forward God's end-time plan for the ages. For Matthew, the Spirit is not over this world or against this world, but in this world and for this world. The Spirit works in Mary's womb in the virgin birth and works in Joseph's mind to cope with that extraordinary birth. The Spirit is with Jesus at his baptism and in the wilderness of temptation. And he suggests something that at the time was unthinkable. God's Messiah really cares about unclean Gentiles. After all, in a story unique to Matthew, the Magi from the East were Gentiles. They were some of the first visitors to the newborn king (Mt 2:1-16). Finally, the Holy Spirit does not recoil from our diseases, defects, and demons. For Matthew, the Spirit does not reject the world because of sin. The Spirit reclaims the world because of God.

Yet Matthew does not want his readers to be naive concerning the things of the Spirit. An unreflective receptivity without mature discernment can do more harm than good. Even though Matthew emphasizes the fulfillment of prophecy, he repeatedly warns against false prophets, false messiahs, and lying wonders.

PAUSE FOR PRAYER

For those who celebrate the power of the Spirit, Matthew's caution merits special attention. We must not only worship in Spirit but also in truth. Indeed, the gift of *discernment* must be brought to bear on all aspects of the church so that we might judge what is of God. This kind of spiritual accountability is itself a prophetic ministry that is desperately needed in the church today (2 Pet 2:1; 1 John 4:1). Pray that God will grant you that special gift to discern what is true from what is false, what is from God from what is not.

THE PRESENCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN MATTHEW

The Holy Spirit "births" the messianic era (Mt 1:18-25). Matthew is careful to note that prior to Joseph and Mary coming together as

husband and wife, Mary became pregnant through the Holy Spirit. The virgin birth came about through the direct agency of the Holy Spirit and was a fulfillment of prophecy (Is 7:14).¹

Matthew's account links the presence of the Holy Spirit and new birth. From the first day of creation to the virgin birth and even extending to the regeneration of all who believe in Christ, the Holy Spirit births new life (Gen 1:1-2). For Matthew, the incarnation wrought by the Spirit represents the new humanity of God, which in turn is the first installment of the restoration of all things (Rom 8:29; Jas 1:18). And unlike Adam, who failed God and humanity, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to triumph for God and his people (1 Cor 15:45; Rom 5:12-21). In sum, the "in-fleshing" of Christ by the Spirit conveys the intimate and immediate connection between the Spirit and all of creation. The Spirit longs to indwell God's people and transform their physical bodies into the temple of God (1 Cor 3:16-17; 6:19-20).

Matthew informs us that the work of the Spirit can be awkward.² The Spirit enters Mary's life while she is unmarried and brings about a pregnancy that, in the eyes of all others, is illegitimate and shameful. As a conservative Jew, her fiancé, Joseph, has a real-world solution to an embarrassing problem: divorce Mary privately. God was fully aware of the social and religious factors facing this young couple. He engages them in the midst of these earthbound issues and directs Joseph via another divine gift: a special dream. Joseph takes action and, in spite of the enduring shame, takes Mary to be his wife.

The Holy Spirit actualizes the kingdom of God (Mt 3:13-17). If the Spirit-conceived Christ marks the beachhead of the kingdom in the

¹In quoting Is 7:14, Matthew does not quote the Masoretic Text (Hebrew Bible), but rather accesses the LXX (Septuagint; the Greek translation of the Hebrew text). The former simply has *almah* ("young woman"), but the latter has *parthenos* ("a virgin"). Matthew wants his readers to understand that the virgin birth is a miracle wrought by the Holy Spirit that fulfills a critical messianic prophecy.

²The leading of the Holy Spirit can be counterintuitive. The public outing of Ananias and Sapphira for lying to the Spirit must have been difficult (Acts 5:1-11). The directing of yet another Ananias to pray for a Pharisee who had tortured and killed Christians was distressing (Acts 9:10-17). Peter's visit to the home of a Gentile centurion was awkward to say the least (Acts 10:1-43). The inherent tension in this passage is resolved when the Holy Spirit "falls" and is "poured out" upon uncircumcised Gentiles and they begin to speak in tongues (Acts 10:44-46).

world, then the Spirit-anointed Christ is an all-out assault against evil. From the moment Jesus receives the Spirit at baptism, he begins a relentless campaign to roll back the curse. He does so by way of healings, exorcisms, and raising the dead. Indeed, some form of the word *heal* or *healed* appears twenty-one times in Matthew. Jesus explicitly says that when he drives out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come among them. The very clothes of Jesus have semi-sacramental significance to effect healing (Mt 9:21; 14:36). Frequently Matthew states that Jesus healed *all* who were brought to him (see Mt 4:24; 8:16; 12:15; 14:14; 15:30; 19:2; 21:14). This kind of charismatic deliverance ministry brackets Jesus' calling of the twelve apostles and is the hallmark of the Spirit-empowered church (Mt 10:1, 8; 2 Cor 12:12).

The Spirit, prophecy and dream revelation. For Matthew, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of prophecy and revelation. Even King David prophecies “in the Spirit” about the coming of the Messiah (Mt 22:41-45).³ In Matthew prophecy is the primary witness that Jesus is the Messiah. Some form of the word *fulfill* is used fifteen times in Matthew. All these instances are in conjunction with major messianic prophecies. For example, from the virgin birth (Mt 1:22-23) to the betrayal by Judas and subsequent arrest of Jesus (Mt 26:54-56; 27:9), fulfilled prophecy is proof positive that Jesus is the Messiah.

Matthew also emphasizes that the Spirit speaks through dreams. From the beginning of his Gospel to the end, Matthew uses the phrase “in a dream” no fewer than six times. Most of these dream revelations come to Joseph, the husband of Mary. Joseph is told in a dream not to hesitate to take Mary for his wife, for the child has been conceived by the Holy Spirit (Mt 1:20). Some dream revelations come to persons who are outside the pale of Judaism, such as the Magi from the East (Mt 2:12) and also to Pilate's wife (Mt 27:19).

³Peter's explanation and application of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-13) also quotes Psalm 110 (Acts 2:34-35). Moreover, once Peter has joined the Joel prophecy to the events of Pentecost (compare Acts 2:16-21 with Joel 2:28-31), he launches into a litany of quotations from the Psalms (Ps 16:8-10, 132:11, 16:10). Thus important aspects of Christology and pneumatology find their home in Pentecost and are hermeneutically explained by way of psalms.

This feature in Matthew taps into the ancient Jewish belief that God reveals himself through dreams. From Genesis to Joel, the word *dream* or *dreams* appears over one hundred times in the Old Testament, with the greatest concentrations occurring in Genesis (30×) and Daniel (25×).

Once again, the prophecy of Joel comes into play. Joel states that the Spirit will be poured out on all flesh and that one of the charismatic consequences of this outpouring is that “your old men will dream dreams.” On the Day of Pentecost, Peter links this prophecy to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the church and is careful to include the part about dreaming dreams (Acts 2:17; Joel 2:28). Indeed, Paul had a dream of a man from Macedonia asking for help, and this led him and his missionary team to take the gospel westward into Europe (Acts 16:9). This decision would dramatically affect the church and by extension all of Western civilization. Although Paul’s experience is often translated as “vision,” Luke uses the same word as Matthew for “dream.” These world-changing revelations all came by a Spirit-inspired dream.

All of this constitutes a kind of “divine circularity” for Matthew. The Spirit that first inspired the prophecy is the same Spirit that reveals when the prophecy is fulfilled. Yet prophecy for Matthew is not just “foretelling” by the Spirit but also consists of “forth telling” through the Spirit.⁴ When describing the last days’ persecution of the saints, Jesus tells his disciples that they should not worry about what they will say to their oppressors, for the Holy Spirit will give them the words to speak (Mt 10:19-20).

The Holy Spirit: God’s final and effective work of salvation. One of the most important Scriptures in Matthew is found in 12:18-21. Once again Matthew is quoting a key messianic prophecy found in Isaiah 42:1-4 (see also Mt 11:5 and Lk 4:18-19). These passages join the person and work of the Holy Spirit with the end-time deliverance ministry of the Messiah. The operative words here are *nations* and *justice*. The word *nations* can also be translated “Gentiles.” The Holy Spirit is realizing the expansive ministry of Jesus that will eventually transcend the ethnocentricity of

⁴The noun “prophecy” (*prophēteia*) and verb “prophesy” (*prophēteuō*) are both formed on the same Greek root which can either mean to tell in advance (to foretell) or to proclaim (to speak forth).

first-century Judaism (see Is 49:6). All of this feeds into the Great Commission (Mt 28:18-20). Here the Holy Spirit works as a full partner with the Father and the Son in bringing salvation to the world.

Justice (mentioned twice in Mt 12:18-21) speaks to the defining equity of the Lord, which the Holy Spirit brings about through Jesus. As part of the messianic era, all injustice and oppression will ultimately be exposed, judged, and swept away. In this way, the impeccable fairness of God is seen in his love for non-Jews and his care for the poor (Mt 22:1-13). By extension, crosscultural mission and benevolence are essential to the Spirit's work in the church.

Sign seekers and the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit (Mt 12:24-32). Wherever there is power and influence, people will seek to exploit these qualities to their own advantage. The same holds true for the power of the Holy Spirit. Since the Spirit was so central to Jesus and his mission, Jesus has some harsh words for those who would abuse the Spirit. Matthew repeatedly warns of false prophets whose goal is to exploit the people of God and take advantage of their sincere faith. They peddle magic in the name of God and are savage in their abuse of the saints. They attempt to keep their ruse alive until the very end and yet are soundly rebuked by the Lord and experience eternal judgment (Mt 7:15-23).

Similarly, the enemies of Jesus taunt him to misuse his power. Whether it be the devil (Mt 4:1-11), corrupt religious leaders (Mt 12:38-42) or Roman officials (Lk 23:8), they all demand miraculous signs of the Lord. They have no intension of becoming genuine disciples of Jesus. They want him to compromise his relationship with the Father, grant some cheap trick to satisfy their cynicism, or succumb to an ungodly abuse of power. Such persons are evil and adulterous in the manner of Israel's unfaithfulness to Yahweh (Ezek 6:9; 16:32; Hos 1:2). Jesus does grant them a sign, but it is the sign of Jonah. Matthew's point is that only the miracle of the resurrection fully authenticates Jesus as the Son of God, the promised Messiah (Mt 12:39; 16:4; Lk 11:29-30).⁵

⁵What's interesting is that the sign of Jonah was given to the Ninevites, a people beyond the covenant and sworn enemies of Israel. What might this say about the Sadducees and the Pharisees?

When addressing those who would misuse the Spirit, an even more heinous sin is revealed. After Jesus' extraordinary season of healings and exorcisms, the Pharisees charge Jesus with casting out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons. They maliciously want to distort and displace the power of the Spirit with the power of the evil one. Their intent is to discredit Jesus and dissuade people from following him.

In response, Jesus levels his most severe indictment against these opponents. He points out that their charge is illogical and contradictory. He casts out demons, not by the power of Satan, but by the Spirit of God. This is a sign that the kingdom of God has come among them. He concludes by stating that every manner of sin will be forgiven, even speaking evil against the Son of Man, but blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven in this life or in the life to come.

Why is Jesus' judgment so harsh? Why does this sin, among all others, lay beyond the scope of repentance and forgiveness? In seeking an answer, one thing is clear. God's best and final offer of salvation, the Spirit's work through his Son, is labeled as coming from Satan. This deliberate and evil distortion strikes at the very root of God's work in the world. There is no higher court of appeal. There are no other options. Those who frame the redemptive work of the Spirit as demonic have sealed their fate.

SUMMARY THOUGHTS

In writing his Gospel, Matthew has a single goal in sight: Jesus of Nazareth is God's Spirit-empowered Messiah. Jesus has been conceived of the Holy Spirit and by way of the Spirit, he fulfills all the ancient prophecies of Israel. Through Jesus and his miraculous demonstration of the Spirit, the kingdom of God is sweeping into this world and pushing back the darkness. Jesus shares this end-time ministry with those who love him and commissions them to teach and make disciples until his return.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR ME?

Matthew's message is encapsulated in three words: power, promise, and problems. The God of all creation has sent his Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. The universe is not closed but open, and God is in our midst establishing the kingdom even now. This wonder-filled reality grants great promise to all who believe. The dark forces that often bedevil our lives have been served notice in the Spirit. Yet problems remain. People will seek to commandeer the power of the Spirit and turn it to their own advantage. They will exploit sincere faith and even put God to the test. These charlatans appeal to God, but only on their own terms. Their interest in the Spirit is directed by their own selfish desires.

The Gospel leads in a totally different direction. In Matthew, the miracle-working power of the Spirit brings glory to God, affirms the supremacy of Christ and relieves the suffering of others. Matthew's portrait of the Spirit is like a mosaic. From a distance we can take in the whole picture, but as we draw nearer, we are challenged by the parts. The critical question is, How do we fit into Matthew's picture of Christ and the Spirit?

This is certainly something to pray about as we seek to follow Jesus and grow in grace (2 Pet 3:18).

- ✦ To what extent am I really open to the leading of the Spirit? Healings and deliverance are welcome, but what if, as was the case with Mary and Joseph, the work of the Spirit becomes awkward? How receptive would I be if, as was the case with Jesus, the Spirit leads into a wilderness of trial? When we say that we want all that the Spirit has for us, do we really mean *all*?
- ✦ Am I open to dream revelation from the Spirit? As noted, throughout the history of Israel and the early church, God revealed his mysteries by way of dreams. Sigmund Freud has been reported to have quipped, "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar." Similarly, sometimes a dream is just a dream and nothing more. Yet according to Scripture, sometimes a dream is a message from God. That's something to pray about.

- ✦ When seeking the good things of the Spirit, what are my true intentions? Am I seeking miracles to bolster a failing faith? Am I a “sign seeker” who puts God to the test? James says we don’t receive answers to prayers because we want to satisfy our own selfish desires (Jas 4:3). Pray for charismatic empowerment so that you might glorify God, strengthen his church, and help your neighbor.
- ✦ Do I believe in miracles or magic? We must be ever mindful that the Holy Spirit is a person, not just a power. As a person, the Holy Spirit can think, speak, make intercession, be grieved, etc. (Rom 8:26-27; Eph 4:30). When we seek to genuinely know the person of the Spirit, we are in the domain of miracles. When we try to manipulate and control the Spirit to meet our own selfish desires, we are in the realm of magic.
- ✦ In making room for the movement of the Spirit, am I vulnerable to persons who are insincere and exploitive? Do I have the spiritual maturity to “test the spirits” to see if they are of God (1 John 4:1)? If they are not of God, do I have the courage to confront error for the strengthening of the church (Acts 5:1-11)?

As you pray and seek the Spirit, recall that from beginning to end, Jesus realizes the kingdom by the power of the Holy Spirit. As his disciples, we too can enjoy this extraordinary presence of the Spirit: the hallmark of the kingdom.

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