



THE INVISIBLE GOD

The Spirit Jesus Sent

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INTRODUCTION:

JOHN 14:16-21: JESUS PROMISES THE HOLY SPIRIT

*16 I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—
17 the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. 18 I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. 19 Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. 20 On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. 21 Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them.”*

If visibility was the test for reality then so much we experience every day would not be real. Think about the wind. You can't see it, but you can see its effects (just look at the swaying tree, the flapping flag), and more personally you can sense it on your skin. So you know it's real.

God is invisible. The dictionary gives two meanings for the word 'invisible'. First, a literal meaning: 'unable to be seen by the eye'. And then a figurative meaning: 'completely overlooked or ignored' – for example, think of the sentence: 'In those days woman writers were pretty much invisible.'

Now, the Scripture affirms that God is invisible (the first meaning) – and sadly, so many people in our culture take the jump and say, 'Since he can't be seen, he should also be overlooked and ignored' (second meaning).

But while the Spirit might be invisible, he's real. If he is real, then the promises about him, and his work on earth are real too. And we need to understand him and seek to allow him to work in us so that we can be transformed by his work and used by God in the Spirit's power. Just look at the effects of his presence (the gospel advancing, people changed, churches thriving) and listen to millions of stories of those who've experienced his tangible, transforming, empowering presence.

This eBook is about the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit.

CHAPTER 1: THE SPIRIT AT WORK IN US

(TEXT: ACTS 2:1-18)

1. THE SPIRIT MAKES THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD'S PRESENCE POSSIBLE

Acts: 2: 1 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Every Christian is indwelt by the Spirit, but not every Christian is filled by the Spirit. We note that the disciples had already been indwelt by the Spirit. Less than 50 days earlier the newly resurrected Christ had come to the disciples and had 'breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit''(John 20:22). This event most likely refers to the moment the Spirit indwelt them. Today, the moment a person trusts in Christ, the Spirit indwells them. Romans 8:9 says, 'And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ.'

Consider what Christ is saying to you as a believer: 'I reside in you – even though you doubt that at times. But I don't just want to reside in you. I want to make my presence known to you. I want to fill you.'

So we know what the Spirit's indwelling is: the permanent residence of the Spirit in the believer. But what is the infilling of the Spirit?

We see in these verses that it is nothing less than the heightened experience of the Spirit's presence and power. We generally are not conscious of the Spirit's indwelling, and must affirm it by faith.

But we are always conscious of the Spirit's infilling when it is happening. It is the conscious experience of God's immediate presence. There are times when we affirm God's presence by faith, though we do not sense it at all.

But when we are experiencing the Spirit's infilling, God's presence is as real to us as the light in the room, the clothes on our body, the air in our lungs.

'All of them were filled by the Holy Spirit' (v4). Today, there is not a Spirit-indwelt believer that God does not also want to fill with his Spirit. 'They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that came to rest upon each of them' (v3). Although they experienced the Spirit in a

gathering together, yet Luke emphasises that each of them were privileged to experience the Spirit personally.

'A sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting' (v2). What is the significance of the wind? The Hebrew word for 'Spirit' is 'ruach', which means wind or breath. Similarly, the Greek word for 'Spirit' is 'pneuma', which also means wind or breath. Jesus once compared the experience of the Spirit to the experience of wind: 'The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.' (John 3:8). The Spirit's infilling can be likened to wind and breath: free, powerful, life-giving, refreshing, not predictable or manage-able.

'They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that came to rest upon each of them' (v3). What is the significance of the fire here? Throughout the Scriptures God's immediate presence has often been compared to fire. Additionally John the Baptist had prophesied that Jesus would baptize people 'with the Spirit and fire' (Luke 3:16). The Spirit's infilling can be likened to fire: energizing, passion-producing, able to be passed on, purifying, bringing light, awe-inspiring.

Is this experience that happened close on 2000 years ago in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost repeatable? Interestingly the answer is both yes and no.

No, because it seems that, since this was the first experience of the Spirit's outpouring on the church, it came along with some unusual phenomena such as the audible experience of wind and the visible experience of fire. Having said that, there is no good reason that God wouldn't do this again – as many have claimed to experience in great revivals of the past. Because God still wants to fill believers with his immediate presence and power we can also answer the question as 'yes'. We may not experience fire visibly or wind audibly, but we certainly can experience the energizing gusts (or perhaps the refreshing breeze) of the Spirit in our hearts, and the passion-producing flames of the Spirit in our inner being.

2. THE SPIRIT MAKES DEEPER TRANSFORMATION POSSIBLE

This all happened on 'the day of Pentecost' (v1).

Why did God wait till Pentecost to pour out his Spirit, a full 10 days after Christ had ascended? God wanted us to see the parallel between the giving of the Law, through Moses and the giving of the Spirit, through Christ. Pentecost commemorated the day when the Law, most specifically the Ten Commandments, were given by God to Israel through Moses 1300 years before, when he was making a covenant with them (now called 'the old covenant'). The Jews sometimes called Pentecost 'shimchath torah', or 'joy of the Law.' The Law of Moses was

given to transform the behaviour and lives of nation of Israel. However the Law of Moses had failed in it's ability to deeply transform the people of Israel simply because it consisted of external laws written on tablets of stone. Jeremiah the prophet, centuries before, had prophesied that God was going to institute a new covenant with his people, one that was based on the law being written on hearts, and not on stone (Jer 31:33). Ezekiel, the prophet, prophesied similarly (Eze 36:26-27). Now, God was fulfilling these prophecies. He originally gave the law to transform his people – from the outside in. Now he was giving the Spirit to transform his people – but from the inside out.

God was writing 'not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts' (2 Cor 3:3).

The point is that the Spirit is given to transform us from the inside out. He writes God's standards upon our hearts. He gives us new desires for godliness, and a new capacity for holiness. By his Spirit's work in our hearts, God energizes in us the very values and behaviour that he commands. The Spirit makes a much deeper transformation possible than was possible if we only had the Law of Moses.

The Spirit is given to us to help us become more like Jesus.

The Spirit transforms us from the inside out. That is a major goal of the Spirit-filled life – that every day and in every way, whether at work or play, on our own or with kids – we act and think and speak in ways that are Christ-like.

2 CORINTHIANS 3:18 IN THE MESSAGE SAYS THIS:

'When we are there in the personal presence of Jesus by his Spirit ... with nothing between us and God ... our faces begin to shine with the brightness of his face. And our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him.'

Christianity is not about rules – it's about a love relationship with God who goes about transforming us from the inside out. Not rules. Relationship. This transformation process takes a lifetime, but it moves steadily forward as we learn to live led by the Spirit.

True story: A powerfully used Chicago-based evangelist called DL Moody was coming to preach in the UK. A threatened pastor said to his friend: 'Who does Moody think he is coming here? Does he think he has a monopoly of the Holy Spirit?' To which his friend answered: 'No, but those who know this man – and have seen his ministry – say the Holy Spirit has a monopoly on him.'

How about you? Are you monopolized by the Spirit? Are you fully surrendered to his transforming work?

3. THE SPIRIT MAKES PROFOUND UNITY POSSIBLE

ACTS 2:5-12: 5

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. 6 When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. 7 Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? 9 Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome 11 (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" 12 Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?"

Genesis 11:1-9 records the fascinating story of people trying to build a skyscraper in Babel. They were trying to unite into one powerful force, but did so arrogantly with the motive of demonstrating their independence from God. God responded by giving them many different languages. It was a miracle of disunity, by which he undermined their ability to understand each other. Still today, the human race is divided. Cultural and linguistic barriers make deep unity impossible. But at Pentecost, God also gave people the ability to speak many languages but this time it was a miracle of unity. Babel was being reversed. The deep longing of the human race for unity was finally being fulfilled. People of multiple cultures and languages (verse 7-11 mentions 16 different geographic cultural groups!) were being brought together by this common experience of the Spirit.

The significance of this is that the Spirit is the one who makes deep unity possible between people with different cultures and language groups. We're bound by a common mission, and by a common experience of the Spirit. This is not to say that we don't have to work at our unity. We do. But thank goodness we don't have to create the unity – that's the work of the Spirit. Our job is to – as Ephesians 3:4 puts it: 'make every effort to KEEP the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace'.

4. THE SPIRIT MAKES HIGHER WORSHIP POSSIBLE

There was a story of a boy sitting on his bike outside a Catholic church, The priest asked him if he wanted to come pray. The boy said yes, but he couldn't leave the bike because someone may steal it. The priest said, 'Oh, don't worry, the Holy Spirit will look after it.' So the boy came in and prayed. At the end of his prayer he did the sign of the crucifix but only prayed, 'In the name of the Father, in the name of the Son' and stopped there. The priest asked him why he stopped there. He answered: 'I can't exactly pray to the Spirit. He's outside with my bike.' It's a funny story – but how often we leave the Holy Spirit outside of our prayer and our worship. That's not what the disciples did however.

It seems that the disciples gathered in the upper room eventually spilled over into the streets, because we're told that a great crowd surrounded them (who obviously couldn't fit in the room). But what is most fascinating is that, though the Spirit-filled disciples were speaking aloud, they were not addressing the crowd itself, but rather God. We're told that they were 'declaring the wonders of God' (v11). We see that as they experienced the Spirit, the eyes of their heart were opened to the wonders of God, and their mouths flowed over with deep heart-felt praise and adoration.

Still today, we cannot expect to reach the heights of praise and worship apart from the enabling ministry of the Spirit. He is the one who energizes our worship. He is the one who opens the eyes of our hearts to the God we're worshipping. He is the one who helps us to express deep praise to God. As Paul said in Philippians 3:3, 'we ... worship God by his Spirit'. John 4:24 says, 'The Father seeks those who will worship him in Spirit and in truth.' That verse tells us the Father enjoys our worship. He loves it when we put in the time and energy to really focus our hearts and our minds on him, and express affection and admiration towards him. Worship is a choice. We don't always feel like worshipping. And it requires some effort. Our minds can so often be in the wrong place and we sometimes need to do the hard work of refocusing it on God. We may be carrying some stuff – which we need to lay down at the feet of God. And we might not feel like praying or singing, but because God desires it, we do it. Often we can find that the best times of worship are those times when despite our desires and headspaces, when we focus on God during a time of singing worship or prayer, we pick up a thermal – much like an eagle does – and learn to lift our hearts higher and higher into God's presence. You guessed it. That thermal is the Spirit.

5. THE SPIRIT MAKES JOYFUL BOLDNESS POSSIBLE

ACTS 2:13-15:

13 Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine." 14 Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. 15 These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning!

The outpouring of the Spirit came early in the morning. To the observer, the effect of the Spirit's empowering presence was that the disciples looked drunk. Think about that. Intoxicated people tend to be unusually happy, and unusually confident. That's how the church, filled with the Spirit appeared. They were joyfully bold.

Still today, the Spirit makes greater joy possible. 'Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord' (Eph 5:18-19).

The Spirit fills us with song and joy. A question we Christ-followers need to regularly ask each other is, 'How are your joy-levels doing?' Obviously we all have down days, but overall a pattern emerges. If our joy dips usually, it usually says something about our drift from dependence on the Spirit's presence and leadership in our lives.

And still today, the Spirit makes greater boldness possible. Notice Peter. Just more than 50 days before, he had denied he even knew Jesus when asked by a mere servant girl. What a coward! But now, notice how he can stand up in front of 1000s: 'Peter stood up, raised his voice and addressed the crowd' (v14). What boldness! And still today the Spirit is able to fill even the most naturally timid person with great boldness as they proclaim Christ.

6. THE SPIRIT MAKES DIRECT REVELATIONS POSSIBLE

ACTS 2:16-18:

16 No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 17 " 'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. 18 Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.

Today God often speaks to us indirectly. In other words, God speaks to us through a messenger or through the Bible. But God also wants to speak to us directly. Prophecy, visions and dreams (all three mentioned in verse 17) refer to God's ability to give direct revelations to people. Let's define those:

- A prophecy is a verbal message from God to us, or through us to others.
- A vision is a picture or video-like communication from God.
- A dream here refers to a message from God that comes to us while we sleep. This is what Joel (Peter is quoting from Joel 2 here) prophesied the Spirit's outpouring would make a reality in God's people in the future.

Still today, I've seen it so many times, one of the things that tends to increase in people who are experiencing or have recently experienced the Spirit's infilling is the experience of God communicating directly to them through prophecies, dreams and visions. Read Acts 19:6 for example: 'The Holy Spirit came on them, and they all ... prophesied'.

Don't doubt that God wants to speak to you directly by his Spirit. Jesus made a wonderful promise: 'My sheep will hear my voice.' The more dependent we are on the Spirit, and the more space we make in our life to draw close to God through prayer, or Bible reading, or journaling, or simply being quiet in his presence, the more we will detect God's thoughts drip-feeding into ours.

In the early stages we might wonder what are our thoughts and what are God's, but given enough experience we will be able to tell the difference most times. Much like being in a crowd of voices, and then someone whose voice you know speaks, and your ears hone in on that familiar voice, so you can have a mind filled with thoughts, and then God's voice – usually a gentle voice – is recognized. As you hone in on that voice, the other voices disappear into the background. That's the voice of the Spirit, ready to speak life-giving words that have the potential to change your entire day, even your entire life.

The Spirit is invisible but that doesn't mean he's not real. Christ has given him to his followers as a superior replacement to his physical, bodily presence upon the earth. First, at the moment we cross the line of faith, Christ forgives us, the Father accepts us, and the Spirit indwells us. That's salvation. But that's just where it starts. Then the Spirit wants to fill us, lead us, change us. He does so by making possible:

- The experience of God's heightened, often even tangible, presence
- Deeper transformation of our characters so we're more like Jesus
- Profounder unity with fellow-believers
- Higher prayer and worship whether on your own or with fellow-believers
- Joyful boldness
- Direct revelations where God speaks to you

Too many of us have thought of the Spirit as a kind of water-bottle that we drink from, from time to time to just keep us surviving. No, the Spirit is a waterfall, ready to keep you thriving. Let him fill you! Drink as deeply as you want and need.

CHAPTER 2: THE SPIRIT AT WORK THROUGH US

(TEXT: ACTS 1:4-8; 2:16-36)

The Spirit wants to do more than just indwell us – he wants to fill us. Theologians speak about this as the Spirit’s infilling – the way the Spirit gives us a heightened sense of the God’s presence and power. So, to make it crystal clear: All believers have the Spirit’s indwelling, but not all believers have the Spirit’s infilling.

God wants to do much in our lives, and in our church by the power of his Spirit! That’s what we learnt in the last chapters.

ACTS 1: 4

On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. 5 For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” 8 ... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

1. THE SPIRIT FILLS US WITH GOD’S POWER AND PRESENCE

Notice that the Spirit’s infilling is something we can experience. In these verses, three different phrases are used here to describe the experiential nature of the Spirit’s outpouring.

1. The Spirit baptizes us. It is the same word to describe how John the Baptizer dunked people in water. John dunked his disciples in water, while Christ dunks us in the Spirit. The experience of the Spirit immerses, saturates and engulfs us.
2. The Spirit causes us to receive power. The Greek word translated, ‘power’ is ‘dunamis’, which is the root word for dynamite and dynamic. This experience of the Spirit is a powerful, dynamic one.
3. The Spirit comes on us. Again this is an experiential description. The point is that Jesus is here speaking about an experience that the disciples will experience in several days.

Notice that the Spirit’s infilling is something God has promised throughout Scripture. Jesus speaks of the Spirit’s infilling as the ‘gift my Father promised, and which you heard me speak about’. So the Father spoke about it, and so did Jesus. When did the Father promise this? Answer: in the Old Testament prophetic promises (see Ezekiel 36:26-27 and Joel 2:28-29 for example), and through John the Baptist’s prophecy that Jesus would baptize people in the Spirit. And when did Jesus spoke about this? A lot in fact. Listen to John 7:37-39 for

example: 'Come to me all who are thirsty and drink and whoever believes ... out of you will flow streams of Living Water.' He said this referring to the Spirit whom would later be given. Do you see the point? It has always been God's plan to pour out his presence and power upon his people. The Father spoke about it centuries before Christ came. And Jesus spoke about it in his ministry. It is all part of God's plan for his people.

Notice that the Spirit's infilling is evidence that Jesus is enthroned, victorious in heaven. Did you know that in all 4 gospels, John the Baptist prophesied that Jesus would pour out his Spirit upon his followers. But think about it. Jesus called his disciples, started ministering to people in the Spirit's power, then died, then rose again – now he's chatting to his disciples – and he still hasn't done the thing John the Baptist said he would do. He hasn't poured out his Spirit.

Then he makes a startling promise – 'in a few days you will be baptized with the Spirit' (v5). Why the wait? Answer: in a few days Jesus would return to his Father in heaven to rule the world and church as the true King! And only once he's back on his throne would he pour out his Spirit. Then he disappears from the sight of the disciples – and apparently returns to his throne in heaven. But how can the disciples be sure that Jesus is now ruling?

The answer: he pours out his Spirit.

When Jesus ascended he was gone, but the disciples clung to his promise to send them the Holy Spirit. What joy, then, when the dovelike Holy Spirit descended at Pentecost. The disciples had with them the continual reminder that Jesus was alive and victorious at the right hand of the Father.

Have any doubts that Jesus is Alive and Victorious? They'll be gone the moment you experience his Spirit's infilling.

Some practical considerations:

1. What is this experience like? This experience may be dramatic, or it may be gentle, or both. It may when you're praying or reading the Bible on your own, or when you're praying and worshipping with others. It may be something you experience bodily (some people speak of an invisible weight, or a warmth, or a sense of spiritual electricity), or something that merely floods your heart and mind. It will be different for us all, so don't compare your experience of the Spirit to that of other people. Usually, you feel lots of joy and peace in the process, and for some people even a sense of ecstasy.
2. Can we have this experience more than once? Absolutely. Read Acts 2 and it tells us how the early disciples experienced the Spirit's outpouring. Then read Acts 4:31 and we see them experiencing something similar again.
3. Can we live in the Spirit's presence permanently? Yes and no. There are different degrees of intensity in the Spirit's presence.

On the less intense side, think of a father and child walking down the road. The child can walk next to the father, holding hands. He can think to himself: the father is with me. He is holding my hand and I am holding his. That's a non-intense experience between a parent and child. Same with the Spirit. We can live conscious that the Spirit is with us, holding us, ready to guide us, and empower us as need be. And we can keep this hand-in-hand consciousness up all day every day with some years of practice. In this sense, yes we can live in the Spirit's presence permanently!

But on the more intense side, think of this father suddenly lifting the son off the ground, and hugging him, and saying, 'I love you, my boy!' That's intense, isn't it? In this sense, we obviously can't experience this kind of Spirit infilling that all the time. It's up to God to give us those more memorable experiences.

2. THE SPIRIT ENABLES US TO FULFIL OUR MISSION

Notice that every Christ-follower and every church is given a mission by Christ. It's to advance Christ's kingdom. It's to represent Christ in this world through our words and deeds. It's to tell others about Jesus, inviting them to also know him and love him. We're called to be Christ's 'witnesses' (v8). We tell other people just how real Jesus is. What an important mission we're on. The stakes are just so high. If people fail to find Jesus, they fail to find life! Now, notice that this mission that God gives us is to impact people both near and far. Notice the progressive geographical spread of the gospel that Jesus envisioned in verse 8: Jerusalem, the Judea, then Samaria, and then the ends of the world.

Jerusalem was a city in the province of Judea. Samaria was a province north of Judea. God's plan for the church then and now is that, starting where we are but then progressively extending to the ends of the earth, the gospel will be preached. This task is a massive one. It will require more than mere human strategies and energies. It will require Spirit-directed strategies, and Spirit-empowered energies! Interestingly, the book of Acts details how the church, once baptized with the Spirit, did indeed spread through Jerusalem, through Judea, then into Samaria, and then beyond that to far-off nations! Christ empowered them by the Spirit, and he still empowers us by the Spirit to change the world, starting with the people closest to us.

Notice that we simply can't change the world – not even change one life – apart from the Spirit's power. Once Jesus was resurrected the apostles were no doubt filled with a fresh confidence. They probably wanted to get out there and tell everyone about Jesus. But Jesus instead instructs them to not leave Jerusalem until they experience the Spirit's power. This is his way of saying, 'To do the work I have for you, you need more than natural confidence, and even the possession of the truth. You need nothing less than an outpouring of the Spirit's power. Don't even try start your ministry until you have this.' And as we do this series – if

you're a Christ-follower, that's the same thing he is saying to you: you need the Spirit's power as a matter of priority!

Want an example? Listen to the words of a man, called Charles Finney, who comments on the connection between power and mission: 'God would gave me mighty infillings of the Holy Spirit that went through me, as it seemed, body and soul. I immediately found myself endued with such power from on high that a few words dropped here and there to individuals were the means of their immediate conversion. My words seemed to fasten like barbed arrows in the souls of men. They cut like a sword. They broke the heart like a hammer. Multitudes can attest to this. But then, over time I would find myself in a great measure empty of this power. I would preach to people, only to find that I made no saving impression. I would exhort and pray with few results. I would then set apart a day for private fasting and prayer... after humbling myself and crying out for help, the power would return upon me with all its freshness. This has been the experience of my life.'

So you want your life to count for Christ, do you? So you want to fulfil your mission, do you? Well, you're going to need more than clever strategies (though these will help). You're going to need more than a good knowledge of the Bible and the gospel (though this is indispensable). You're going to need more than determination and perseverance (though that will be needed to). You need power. The power of the Spirit! And like, Charles Finney, why not determine now to be a person who is filled with the Spirit, a person who cries out in prayer day and night, year after year, for power. This series is a great time to really seek more of God's power for the mission he has for you!

3. THE SPIRIT RELEASES CREATIVITY INTO THE MISSION

ACTS 2: 16 THIS IS WHAT WAS SPOKEN BY THE PROPHET JOEL:

17 " 'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. 18 Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.

Here Peter is quoting an ancient prophecy, Joel 2, about what the Holy Spirit will work amongst his people. So, as we saw in the last point, we're on a mission. But what does this mission look like? Although there are some constants, these verses anticipate radical creativity and entrepreneurship in God's people. Every generation of believers, every church, every believer needs to give themselves to mission in the unique way the Spirit leads them.

Genesis 1:2 said that the Spirit was hovering over the sea while the world was being created. He is the agent of creation. Inconceivable power and creativity reside in him. Look at the sheer diversity and brilliance of the world we live in.

It is not too much to expect that where he is present, there will be an uprush of creativity. In fact one can safely say that the Spirit finds it difficult to use a person or church who says, 'But we've never done it this way before.'

Our connection to the Spirit should set us dreaming. We shouldn't be surprised that people in the Spirit get more creative, artistic, and entrepreneurial. Just look at these verses: the old who are immersed in the Spirit start to dream again, and young people start to get visions.

Creativity and entrepreneurship forms a major part of our mission into the world. It finds new ways to communicate an ancient message. It finds new ways to organize God's people in our unique culture. It finds new ways to diminish suffering and beautify our world. It helps shape the culture of our day, taking us from the world we now live in, to the world we're becoming.

God has a dream and a vision for our lives, for our church, for our city – and he releases sparks of that dream and vision into Spirit-bathed communities. Bono of U2 reflects this work of the Spirit when he says, 'Dream up the world you want to live in. Dream out loud. Dream in full volume.' Wherever the Spirit is, there will be lots of new things happening.

4. THE SPIRIT EMPOWERS US TO LEAD PEOPLE TO SALVATION

ACTS 2: 19

I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. 20 The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. 21 And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'

God's judgment is radical. Peter continues to quote Joel 2 (Joel 2:30-31 specifically), which speaks of God's coming judgment. Wonders in the heavens, signs on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke, sun turning into darkness, and moon turning into blood is all poetic language for God's coming judgment. The fact that the Spirit has been poured out means that we are now in the last days, the days just before God's great and glorious judgment on all the people who have ever lived. Still today, the outpouring of the Spirit quickens in us a sense of urgency. God's judgment draws closer.

But God's salvation is also radical. Against the backdrop of this awe-inspiring judgment (v19-20), God is ready to save anyone who calls on the name of Jesus, the Lord. Judgment is radical, but salvation from this judgment is even more radical. Still today, the outpouring of the Spirit accelerates the salvation of people. We see this happen on Pentecost as no less than 3000 people come to faith through on the very day of this outpouring (v42). The Spirit accelerates the conversion of people in two ways. First, the Spirit motivates and empowers

Christians to communicate the gospel to the unsaved. Second, the Spirit cuts unsaved people to the heart (v37) as they hear the gospel. While they hear the gospel being communicated, the Spirit convinces their hearts that they're sinners in need of salvation. Jesus said that 'when he (the Spirit) comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin' (John 16:8). Once the Spirit does this in a sinner's heart, they are far more likely to call on the name of Jesus. Wonderfully, 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord' is saved!

Oh, Church, God's judgment on our city is real. Every person, without realizing it, is on a collision course with a Holy God. But God's salvation through Jesus is available. How desperately we need to lead people to this salvation!

5. THE SPIRIT MAGNIFIES CHRIST, ESPECIALLY THROUGH PREACHING

ACTS 2: 22

"People of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know..."

The greatest result of the outpouring of the Spirit is Christ-magnifying preaching. When the Spirit is poured out on a group of people, God tends to choose one or more individuals to stand up and start powerfully preaching about Christ. That's what happened in Acts 2. Verse 1-21 tells of the outpouring of the Spirit, as well as Peter standing up to explain that this was none other than God at work. But that was merely an introduction. The message only gets properly started in verse 22: "'People of Israel, listen to this: Jesus...'

From verse 22-36 he preaches about Jesus. As he does so, he powerfully impresses upon the minds and hearts of the hearers the stunning reality of Christ! Notice how he magnifies Christ:

Verse 22: Jesus, a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know.

Verse 23: Jesus, nailed to a cross, by God's deliberate plan

Verse 24: Jesus, raised from the dead by God, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

Verse 33: Jesus, exalted to the right hand of God, has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.

Verse 34: Jesus, to whom the Father has said, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet."

Verse 36: Jesus whom God has made 'both Lord and Messiah.'

When the Spirit comes upon a preacher, Jesus will be the focal point of that message.

Still today, the Spirit longs to exalt Christ in the world. Jesus foretold that ‘when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you’ (John 16:13-14). One of the surest signs of the Spirit’s power at work in a people is the dynamic exaltation of Christ through preaching! Regardless of any new communication methods that come with new technologies, God will still continue to use the Spirit-empowered voice of a preacher, who themselves is set on fire with the gospel of Christ. Modern day preachers should remember the words of John Wesley, “Light yourself on fire with passion and people will come from miles to watch you burn.”

And notice that the dominant theme of Spirit-empowered preaching is Jesus. The preacher – filled with the Spirit – sees Jesus more clearly. Then the preacher – filled with the Spirit – preaches about Jesus – and the people see Jesus more clearly. It is as though Jesus makes a grand entry into the room through preaching.

Do you know what Jesus said the main thing the Spirit would do would be? Listen to his answer: ‘The Spirit will glorify me – making me known to you’ (John 16:14). Now think of an illustration: Table Mountain by night. The mountain stands there in all its glory but no one can see it. Until they put the floodlights on, that is. Then it’s visible to all. Ah, what a sight! That’s what the Spirit does. Through Christ-magnifying preaching, he opens our eyes to see the contours and the crevices in Christ. We see him standing there – strong, full of courage, merciful and mighty, accessible yet almighty, as tender as a lamb, yet as fierce as a Lion. And we come undone. All the time, the Spirit throws light. It is as if the Spirit says, “Look at him, and see his glory; listen to him and hear his word; go to him and have life; get to know him and taste his gift of joy and peace.”

Not only does the Spirit want to work in us, he wants to work through us. And he does this in at least five ways...

1. The Spirit fills us with God’s power and presence
2. The Spirit enables us to fulfil our mission
3. The Spirit releases creativity into the mission
4. The Spirit empowers us to lead people to salvation
5. The Spirit magnifies Christ, especially through preaching

CHAPTER 3: MAKING SENSE OF BAPTISM IN THE SPIRIT

Just because the Spirit is invisible does not mean he's not real. After all, think of the wind: you can't see the wind, but you can see and sense the effects of the wind. In the same way, you can't see the Spirit but you can see and sense the effects of the Spirit.

This chapter explores the following three points:

1. At the exact moment in time that you trust in Jesus as your Lord and Saviour, the Spirit indwells you. We call this the Indwelling of the Spirit.
2. From time to time, God likes his people to have intensified experiences of his nearness and power. We call this Baptism of the Spirit.
3. All the time, day after day, hour after hour, God wants you to learn to live in reliance on, and in harmony with his Spirit. We call this Walking in the Spirit.

1. THE INDWELLING OF THE SPIRIT

1 COR 6:19

'Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own.'

Paul the apostle wrote these words to the Corinthian believers. They lived in a city with some of the world's most famous religious temples: temples of Aphrodite, Apollo, Poseidon and Hermes for example. In each temple there the specific god stood. And because that god inhabited the temple, that God also owned the temple.

But the Christian church had no temple. Paul reminds them they don't have a temple because they are temples. And not temples of some mythical Greek god or goddess, but temples of the real Living Spirit. And since he indwells them, he also owns them.

But when does the Spirit indwell us?

Answer: at the exact moment we trust in Jesus as our Lord and Saviour.

The moment the Spirit indwells you, do you realize it's happening? Answer: usually not, though many people say they felt something happening inside of them. On this point, some Christians can remember the moment they became a Christian and God started to live inside of them. Their spiritual awakening can be likened to a person who wakes up with a sudden alarm clock. However many, if not most, Christians can't point to a single moment when God started living in them. Their awakening can be likened to a person who doesn't wake up suddenly, but rather gradually – slowly but surely, sometimes over days or weeks, becoming conscious that Jesus is their Saviour and they now belong to God.

2. BAPTISM OF THE SPIRIT

From time to time, God likes his people to have intensified experiences of his nearness and power.

We see this in Acts 1:4-5, & 8: 4 On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. 5 For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” 8 ... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you...

Jesus speaks of the Spirit's infilling as the 'gift my Father promised, and which you heard me speak about'. So the Father spoke about it, and so did Jesus. The Father promised this in the Old Testament prophetic promises (see Ezekiel 36:26-27 and Joel 2:28-29 for example), and through John the Baptist's prophecy that Jesus would baptize people in the Spirit.

Jesus spoke about it a lot too – John 7:37-39 for example: 'Come to me all who are thirsty and drink and whoever believes ... out of you will flow streams of Living Water.' He said this referring to the Spirit whom would later be given.' Do you see the point? It has always been God's plan to pour out his presence and power upon his people. The Father about spoke about it centuries before Christ came. And Jesus spoke about it in his ministry. It is all part of God's plan for his people.

Notice how these verses speak of an experience...

1. The Spirit baptizes us. It is the same word to describe how John the Baptizer dunked people in water. John dunked his disciples in water, while Christ dunks us in the Spirit. See that? Christ wants to 'dunk' us in the Spirit. The Greek word 'baptizo' can also mean saturate, immerse and engulf.
2. The Spirit causes us to receive power. The Greek word translated, 'power' is 'dunamis', which is the root word for dynamite and dynamic. This experience of the Spirit is a powerful, dynamic one.
3. The Spirit comes on us. Again this is an experiential description. The point is that Jesus is here speaking about an experience that the disciples will experience in several days.

Now turn to Acts 2:1-4: 1 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit... Just ten days later, to see how Jesus keeps his promise. God grants them an intensified experience of his power and nearness.

What is the significance of the wind? The Hebrew word for 'Spirit' is 'ruach', which means wind or breath. Similarly, the Greek word for 'Spirit' is 'pneuma', which also means wind or breath. Jesus once compared the experience of the Spirit to the experience of wind: 'The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.' (John 3:8). The Spirit's infilling can be likened to wind and breath: free, powerful, life-giving, refreshing, not predictable or manage-able.

What is the significance of the flames of fire? Throughout the Scriptures God's immediate presence has often been compared to fire. Additionally John the Baptist had prophesied that Jesus would baptize people 'with the Spirit and fire' (Luke 3:16). The Spirit's infilling can be likened to fire: energizing, passion producing, able to be passed on, purifying, bringing light, awe-inspiring.

Is this experience that happened close on 2000 years ago in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost repeatable? My answer is yes and no. No, because it seems that, since this was the first experience of the Spirit's outpouring on the church, it came along with some unusual phenomena such as the audible experience of wind and the visible experience of fire. Having said that, there is no good reason that God wouldn't do this again – as many have claimed to experience in great revivals of the past. But yes, because God still wants to fill believers with his immediate presence and power. We may not experience fire visibly or wind audibly, but we certainly can experience the energizing gusts (or perhaps the refreshing breeze) of the Spirit in our hearts, and the passion-producing flames of the Spirit in our inner being.

NOW TURN TO ACTS 4:5:

5 The next day the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. 6 Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and others of the high priest's family. 7 They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"

Peter had healed someone and had preached Christ in the wake of the healing. Now some of the most powerful religious and political leaders intimidate Peter. But notice what happens next:

8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: ... 10 It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. 12 Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved."

Right there, as Peter is being intimidated, God grants him an intensified experience of the Spirit's presence and power – and this emboldens him to preach the gospel.

31 After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

We see here that the very same group of people who had an intensified experience of the Spirit's nearness and power, now some months later, have a similar experience once again. Still today, believers can have repeated intensified experiences of the Spirit's presence and power.

And notice that this experience is not given for their entertainment, but to embolden and empower them for the mission God has given them.

14 When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria. 15 When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit, 16 because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. 17 Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Here is a brand new bunch of Christians. Peter and John laid their hands on them and prayed a simple prayer: 'Oh God, baptize these people in your Spirit'. And God answers their prayer – right there and then! These new believers have an intensified experience of God's nearness and power!

There are many other references in the book of Acts but let's now answer some questions about experiencing God in this way:

First, why does God give his people these experiences?

There are two main reasons God pours out his Spirit upon believers:

1. To embolden and empower us for the mission he has for us. Remember Acts 1:8: 'You will receive power when the Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth.'
2. To let us sense the deeply assuring, in-flooding of His love in our hearts. Romans 5:5 says: 'God floods our hearts with love by his Holy Spirit.' And Galatians 4:6 says: 'The Spirit enables us to cry out 'Abba Father'.' This experience of God's nearness and love can be an invigorating one – no wonder Acts 3:19 speaks of these times as 'times of refreshing.'

Second, what is it like to have one of these experiences?

Some people have described it like this:

'Although I already knew God was real, now I knew that I knew that God is real. Doubts were banished from me.'

'Although I already believed God was with me, now I could feel his nearness, his closeness, his embrace.'

'Part of me was a bit shaken by the fact that I'd never experienced anything like this – but at the same time I experienced a peace like nothing I've ever known. I felt so safe. I felt loved.' Let me say one more thing: most people have a gentle experience, but some people speak of a very dramatic presence with extra sensations such as a physical weight on their body, or a feeling of warmth or electricity going through their bodies. Some people say it's hard to remain standing.

Two words of caution:

1. These extra phenomena don't mean your experience of God is anyway more special than a person who doesn't experience them.
2. We should not ask God for these extra phenomena. If he gives them, great. But they are not the point. The point is God's presence and power.

Third, is there anything we can do to have these experiences?

Three key Scriptures provide some keys to help us experience this blessing:

ACTS 5:32:

'God gives his Spirit to those who obey him'. This doesn't mean we earn the baptism of the Spirit. We don't – it's a gift. It doesn't mean we've reached high levels of godliness. It just means we've made a clear decision to give our lives over to Jesus. If there's still rebellion or wilful compromise in us, we can't expect to experience the baptism of the Spirit. So why not give your life over to Jesus?

JOHN 7:37-38: 37

On the last and greatest day of the Festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. 38 Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them."

Here we see that we need to come

1. with thirst,
2. with faith that indeed he wants to pour out his Spirit upon you. 3) We must 'drink' which means to prayerfully engage God, all the time being ready to receive what Christ is ready to give.

“So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. 10 For everyone who asks receives; those who seek find; and to those who knock, the door will be opened. 11 “Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? 12 Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? 13 If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

Here we see that

1. we need to be persuaded that God indeed wants to pour out his Spirit upon us, and
2. we need to ask, seek and knock.

Additionally, though this is often not needed, having Spirit-filled believers pray for us, with the laying on of hands, is a common way to experience the baptism in the Spirit (Acts 8:14-17 and 19:6).

Some of us tend to come into this experience quickly and easily, whereas others of us, for whatever reason, it can take longer. I know people who experienced the Spirit very powerfully on the very day they first became Christians, without even asking God for this. And I know many people who have been prayed for in a meeting, with nothing happening, and then days or months later, on their own somewhere and suddenly the Spirit comes upon them.

As Christians, we must refuse to divide ourselves into ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ since God loves us equally, and these experiences are in no way an indicator of how spiritual we are – after all, it is a free undeserved gift much the same way salvation is a free undeserved gift. Besides, we all have the Spirit living in us!

3. WALKING IN THE SPIRIT

This third point is the most important at all! It is simple to state but so demanding to actually live out: ‘All the time, day after day, hour after hour, God wants you to learn to live in reliance on, and in harmony with his Spirit.’ We call this walking in the Spirit.

We must remember that the Spirit is a person not a force. That’s why we are instructed to ‘fellowship the Spirit’ (2 Cor 13:14). We develop a relationship with him. We keep company with him. We stay in touch, living life hand in hand.

Though he is a person, his activity in our lives is often compared with non-personal things like – as we saw in Acts 2 – fire and wind.

Well, it's wonderful having a mountain top experience of the Spirit's fire. But it's far more important to stay on fire day after day. Romans 12:11 says, 'Keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord.' This verse is telling us to stay on fire with the Spirit. To do this, we need to 'fan into flames' (2 Tim 1:7) the Spirit's activity in our lives. And we need to beware of the danger of 'putting out the Spirit's fire' (1 Thes 5:19).

And it's wonderful having a mountain top experience of the Spirit's wind. But it's far more important that you learn to see yourself as a sail. Every day you hoist that sail, and open yourself to the empowering breeze and gusts of the Spirit, and every day you learn to move in the direction the Spirit blows us.

And you work this out in your everyday relationships – whether with friends or family – and in your every day contexts – whether at work, home, play or traffic.

One of the top theologians of what the Bible teaches about the Holy Spirit is a man called Gordon Fee. He says that there are many commands given in the New Testament, whether by Jesus in the gospels or by the apostles in the letters. Some of these commands instruct us to be close to God, others instruct us to be more like Jesus in our character, others instruct us to deepen our love for people in our life, others instruct us to deepen our conviction that Jesus is Lord, others instruct us to make a contribution in the church, and others commission us to make a difference in the world. But Gordon Fee says there is one command that comes before all of these commands – one command that enables us to fulfil all of these commands and it's Ephesians 5:18... 'Be continually filled with the Spirit'.

Now, as we saw in Acts 2:4, 'being filled with the Spirit' can be used to refer to the baptism of the Spirit, those wonderful mountaintop moments with Christ. But it can also refer to something else. When Paul writes these words in Ephesians 5, he is not referring to the baptism of the Spirit. How do we know? Because he is commanding us to literally be continually filled with the Spirit – and we have seen in Acts that the baptism of the Spirit is not continual but momentary. Also, the baptism in the Spirit is something Christ does – so we can't make it happen. So Paul does not mean 'baptism with the Spirit' when he tells us to be continually filled with the Spirit in Ephesians 5.

He is commanding every Christ-follower, every day, and every hour to live dependent on the Spirit, hand-in-hand with the Spirit, in tune with the Spirit, walking with the Spirit, keeping in step with the Spirit! And it is as you obey this command that you are both motivated and empowered to obey every other command!

CHAPTER 4: MAKING SENSE OF TONGUES AND PROPHECY

(TEXT: ACTS 19:6; 1 CORINTHIANS 14:1-5)

This chapter deals with two supernatural abilities or 'gifts' that the Holy Spirit often gives to Christ-followers – tongues and prophecy.

Many of you may have a whole bunch of caricatures in your mind with regard to these gifts. Generally speaking, people in our culture are terrified of all things that seem crazy and frenzied – and that's often how people think of tongues and prophecy – as though people are losing control in a kind of spiritual hysteria. You'll be glad to know that we're just as put off by that as you are.

You might not find this one that relevant to your life, but if you listen carefully you might find yourself thinking: 'My goodness. God is real. And perhaps I am missing out on a whole world of spiritual reality, a world where God speaks and acts?'

And, if you're a Christ-follower and you have experienced these gifts but they have brought a measure of confusion, then hopefully this chapter will really clear up for you, so that you can navigate your way forward without veering off on the one side to the non-use of these gifts, or veering off on the other side to the abuse of these gifts. We're aiming at the correct use of these gifts.

Tongues and prophecy are meant to be extremely common gifts given to Spirit-filled believers.

ACTS 19:6

And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying.

Some new believers were filled with the Spirit's presence and power. And more than just experiencing God's heightened presence, they were given two verbal gifts: tongues and prophecy.

1 CORINTHIANS 14:1:

1 Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.

This verse is so important. It encourages us to love people AND to eagerly desire spiritual gifts. In Corinthians 12, Paul encourages us to pursue the gifts. In 1 Corinthians 13, he encourages us to pursue love even more than we pursue the gifts. Now in verse 1, Paul tells us to do both at the same time: 'Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts.'

We need to do all we can to love people, and to grow our capacity for loving people. This will govern the way we use the gifts of the Spirit. And, it will also increase the intensity with which we pursue the gifts. The gifts of the Spirit are, after all, powerful tools for building others up. When we love people we want for them more than what we in our own capacity can give them. We will want for them what God alone can do. And the gifts allows God to do just that.

1 CORINTHIANS 14: 2

For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit. 3 But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. 4 He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. 5 I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified.

This passage speaks about tongues and prophecy. And that's what I will now talk about. (Each point I make is supported by Scripture, but I don't have time to look up all those Scriptures. But we will upload onto our website the written document with references for you to see if you want.)

SPEAKING IN TONGUES

Verse 2 tells us what it is: 'For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit.'

AND VERSE 14-15, FURTHER DOWN, SAYS:

'14 For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. 15 So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my understanding; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding.'

Tongues is a Spirit-inspired utterance, in which case the Spirit enables a person's own spirit to speak – what this verse calls - 'mysteries' (v2).

It is not exactly the Spirit speaking through us, but rather the Spirit enabling our spirits to speak. And since it is our spirit that is speaking, our mind (the usual source of spoken words) is bypassed.

But what does this speech sound like? Verse 14 says: 'My mind is unfruitful'. In other words, it is speech that is unintelligible to us and to those who hear it. Those who have this gift say that it sounds different at different times – sometimes it's just a few syllables repeated again and again, and at other times it has great variety of sound.

For personal or public use?

Listen to what Paul says in verse 18-19: '18 I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. 19 But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.' We see that there are 2 kinds of tongues...

1. Personal tongues. This is used in one's own prayer life. We see Paul saying to an entire church: 'I speak in tongues more than all of you.' This means that Paul very regularly, perhaps every day, would pray in tongues at some point. But notice that Paul would not use this gift in a Christian meeting since it would be of no help to anyone else. Can a person include the use of tongues during times of prayer or worship in a Christian gathering? The answer is yes, but only under your breath - as verse 28 suggests. Praying it aloud may be distracting or confusing to some, and it will be of no use to anyone but yourself.
2. There is the public use of tongues. This is a considerably rarer gift. This is when a person, in an appropriate meeting, under the leadership of the people overseeing the meeting, speaks in a tongue aloud. It is always meant to be followed immediately by an interpretation, given either by another person, or in some cases, by the person themselves.

Some of you may ask: Why do we not hear public tongues followed by interpretation in our Sunday meetings? Answer: We don't believe that every type of Christian gathering is right for this gift. For us, we're certainly open to it in a prayer meeting, but not in a Sunday meeting. Why not? For us, Sunday meetings are not just for believers, but also for our friends and family who have yet to discover God. Now, in our context – 21st century, highly educated, and highly sceptical people – we have found that it is very off-putting to not-yet Christians. They assume we're a cult or something, and we have lost control of ourselves. In other contexts and cultures this is not what people think at all – but in ours that is the case. So we generally discourage it in our Sunday meetings, but are open to it in those meetings where only Christians are present – like in a prayer meeting for example – but, if we're honest, it very rarely happens.

Why does God give some people the personal gift of tongues?

It is one way God makes us vividly aware of his closeness. The Spirit lives in every believer. But generally speaking, we're not aware of this. But when we speak in tongues we have immediate evidence of how the Spirit has access to the depth of our beings – the place from where these words rise. Over the years, I have often used tongues as a way of drawing closer to God. I think that's why Paul writes: 'he who prays in tongues edifies himself'.

The word 'edify' here can mean 'recharge'. We recharge our lives with the presence and power of God, much like a cell-phone recharges itself on a current of power.

It helps us express our deepest heart to God. We are particularly limited in our language. When children (or even adults) write thank you letters it is not long before they run out of language, or we use the words 'amazing', 'wonderful', 'awesome' over and over. When it comes to expressing our love for God, there comes a time when we run out of words – and singing or praying in tongues becomes a wonderful way of pouring our hearts out to God without the limitation of language.

It helps us to pray under pressure. In times of anxiety, burden, grief or pressure, we just don't know what to pray.

ROMANS 8:26,27 SAYS:

'We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.'

Is there anything we can do to receive this gift? Yes!

Ask God to fill you with his Spirit. The book of Acts reveals that the experience of the Spirit's infilling is usually the environment in which the gift is given.

Ask God for this gift. Matthew 7 tells us that a Father he is ready to give us whatever good gift we ask for. This is a great gift! Perhaps he will give it to you in a time of personal prayer, or perhaps in a time of worship. In some cases people receive the gift at surprising times – like my friend (Sarah) who was sitting in her car waiting for the robots to turn green – and suddenly she spoke in tongues.

Two practical tips:

1. Perhaps ask someone who has the gift of tongues to pray for you that you also receive this gift.
2. Realize that the Spirit doesn't speak in tongues. You do - with the Spirit's help. Many people have found it helpful to – once they're in God's presence – to open their mouth and start to pray, but not in English or a language they know. And then it comes.

PROPHECY

What is prophecy? Answer: prophecy is the Spirit-inspired speaking for God with God-given words to a person or to a group of people. It includes both the receiving of some revelation from God, as well as the sharing of that revelation with others.

Why does God give this gift? Verse 3 tells us it is meant to strengthen, encourage and comfort fellow-Christians. Verse 4 tells us it is meant to edify the church. How desperately Christians need to be strengthened, encouraged, comforted and edified – and prophecy is a major way God does just that!

Does God want to give all Christians the ability to prophesy? Yes. The fact that Paul tells us to eagerly seek it (v1,39) reveals something of God's willingness to give it to his children. Though very few people in the Old Testament had the ability to prophesy, yet in the age of the Spirit that Christ's exaltation has inaugurated, prophecy has become readily available to all. In Acts 2:17-18, Peter claims that the prophecy of Joel has come to fulfillment: 'In the last days, God says, 'I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.'

Are there different degrees of prophetic gifting? Yes. Although all Christians are encouraged by Paul to pursue prophesy as a gift, not all will have the privilege of moving in it to the same degree. Though many Christians may prophesy from time to time, there are some Christians that seem gifted by God to prophesy more regularly and with greater accuracy and power. The New Testament seems to refer to these people who are used exceptionally as 'prophets'.

Is there a difference between Old Testament (OT) and New Testament (NT) prophecy? There are some notable differences, see table below:

| Old Testament | New Testament |
|--|--|
| Prophetic gifting was rare | Far more commonplace |
| Prophets were infallible (the sign of a false prophet was that they got even one prophecy wrong) and therefore needed to be instantly obeyed or believed | Prophecies needed to be weighed before they are obeyed or believed |
| Prophets, being the very mouthpieces of god, had the highest spiritual authority in god's people (even higher than kings); prophets were accountable to no one but god | Elders have higher spiritual authority; prophets are accountable to the elders |
| Prophets most commonly prophesied warning and judgment to people who had rejected god and his ways | Prophets generally encouraged god's people |

What is the relationship between the Bible and prophecy? Both are the result of the Spirit's revelation. The Bible is inspired by the Spirit so that its teachings, properly understood, are an infallible revelation from God. The Bible is all of God's truth for all of God's people at all times. But prophecy merely builds upon this revelation. It emphasises and highlights some of God's truth to some of God's people at some times. That's why, any prophetic claim must never contradict doctrines taught in the Scriptures; if it does, it must be dismissed.

However, prophecy can in non-doctrinal ways go beyond Scriptures without contradicting them. It does this when God wants to reveal specific information to a person or a church that is not doctrinal in nature. For example, when the prophets helped discern that God wanted Paul and Barnabas to begin their missionary journey (Acts 13:1-2), this was not doctrinal in nature.

How does God give revelations? In order to prophesy one must be able to receive direct revelations from God. God puts things in us: 'Nehemiah wrote, 'So God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles' (Nehemiah 7:5). Obviously, there are varying levels of intensity and clarity in these revelations. So, how do direct revelations come to a person?

1. Revelations usually come as one is drawing close to God in prayer or worship (see Acts 13:1-2 as example of this).
2. Revelations often come as one reads or ponders parts of the Bible. That said, a revelation may also come when one is not reading or thinking about the Bible at all.
3. Revelations usually come through simple God-given 'impressions'; this is when a thought comes to a person that they recognize to be a thought that comes from the Spirit. One person described it like this: 'My head is full of thoughts as it always is – but then I sense God's presence, and suddenly one thought seems to rise up in the midst of all the thoughts – this thought is clear, it is peaceful, it is a thought that seems to have a life of its own – the others thoughts fade into the back-ground.
4. Revelations sometimes come in the form of visions and dreams. Acts 2:17-18 tells us that the ability to prophesy is often associated with God-given dreams and visions. This means that either while one sleeps, or while one is awake God may reveal a picture of some kind. Sometimes these pictures can be exceptionally vivid, but other times less so.
5. Then there are other more uncommon ways that a revelation may come: while one is having an ecstatic experience (see 1 Sam 19:19-24), is in a trance (Acts 10:10-19), encounters an angel, or hears an audible voice (sometimes it is only audible to the person).

Are all 'revelations' truly comes from God? We must proceed with caution since not every so-called revelation really comes from God. Just because a person has a vivid spiritual experience, and gets a revelation during that time, does not mean that the spiritual experience was necessarily God, or that the revelation was necessarily God – no matter how real and wonderful the experience may have been.

That's why we're told to test the authenticity and accuracy of prophecies and spiritual experiences (1 John 4:1, 1 Cor 14:29). There is such a thing as false prophecy. Even Christians can bring misguided prophetic words either out of their own imagination (Jer 14:14) or, more seriously, because of demonic deception (1 Tim 4:1).

Though the pitfalls of getting revelations from God are real, yet God still does give people direct revelations. And though we need to be aware of the devils' ability to deceive us, we need to be in awe of God's ability to lead us into the truth. And we can be encouraged by the fact that it is not so much our ability to receive a revelation as much as it is God's ability to give a revelation that counts.

Some guidelines for prophesying:

1. Don't be surprised that God speaks both to you and through you by drawing on your range of vocabulary, experiences, mental imagery, and level of doctrinal understanding. Generally speaking, the 'raw material' the Holy Spirit uses in a revelation is what's already in you.
2. It is common for a person to share a message God has given them, then as they speak more seems to flow – much like pulling a tissue out of a tissue pop-up box. Keep going till the tissues stop coming.
3. Don't assume that just because God has given you a revelation that you know what it means, or how to share it (if you must share it at all). A good prayer to pray is this, 'God, I believe you have given me this revelation. But what does it mean? And what do I do with it? Please show me.'
4. Don't say, 'Thus says the Lord' but rather, 'I think / feel God is saying that'. Since NT prophecy is fallible, it is best to be humble in how we share it.
5. Don't despise the day of small beginnings (Zech 4:10). Those whom God uses prophetically generally speak of a growing accuracy in their own journey of being used by God. At first God may give you some very simple revelations, but as you are faithful in sharing them, God begins to trust you with clearer, more accurate, more consistent prophetic messages.
6. Be very wise with what you do with predictive, confrontational, corrective or directive words. Since prophecy is generally to strengthen and encourage Christians (1 Cor 14:3), whenever you go beyond what encourages to what predicts, confronts, corrects or directs you're moving into unusual prophecy. These kinds of prophecy have a far greater capacity to impact people either for good, or for bad. The best thing to do is to submit these kinds of words to the pastoral leadership of your church. Let them decide what's best to do with them.

What do I do with a personal prophetic word that another person gives me?

1. Ask three questions: Does it line up or contradict the teachings of the Bible? Does it line up with what God has already shown me in the past? Does it resonate or jar with my spirit, leaving me peaceful or disturbed?
2. Understand that very often a prophetic word will merely confirm something God has already been showing you.
3. If the word is predictive (i.e. it tells you something will happen in your life), corrective (i.e. it confronts something negative in your life), directive (i.e. it tells you to make a certain decision), then show it to the leaders who watch over you.
4. Write them down and record them for future encouragement and evaluation. For example, Paul encouraged Timothy to recall the prophetic words he had received. They were words that detailed God's plan to use him as a leader: 'Timothy, my son, I am giving you this command in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by recalling them you may fight the battle well' (1 Tim 1:18).

How do we receive the gift of prophecy?

The Bible does not give a decisive answer. What it does say is that

1. God gives some gifts to us without us even asking for them (1 Cor 12:11).
2. The experience of the Spirit's infilling sometimes activates the gift of prophecy (see Acts 2:17-18, 19:6).
3. We can eagerly ask God to give us the gift of prophecy (1 Cor 14:1,39 and Matt 7:7-9).
4. Learn to hear God for yourself. As you hear him speak to you, you will gain confidence to let him speak through you.
5. Once God does grant us this gift, we need to exercise it by staying close to God, and by being ready to step out in obedience any moment God leads us. We're told to 'try excel in gifts that build up the church' (1 Cor 14:12). So if God uses us prophetically, we should ask him to grow you in it more and more.

When's a good time to prophesy in Common Ground meetings?

Remember that God can use you prophetically in any setting – not just in Christian meetings, but with regard Common Ground meetings...

1. We believe that, not always but usually, there is a dominant thread of prophecy in all our preaching. We seek to bring a message from God to the church in the Spirit's power.
2. In the prayer times in small groups, be open to any prophetic words that encouraged the group or specific people in the group.

3. In the prayer meetings we often ask, 'Does anyone sense God saying anything?'
4. If you've gained some prophetic experience in small groups or prayer meetings, then you could bring a prophetic word to the elder leading the meeting – and submit it to him.

However, don't assume that just because you're in a meeting and God is speaking to you that he wants everyone to hear what he's saying to you. Ask him, 'God, is this just for me, or is it for everyone.' The elder leading the meeting may ask you to share it, or may share it on your behalf, or may use it to guide his leadership of the meeting.