

THE SPIRIT WHO EMPOWERS

A Gospel-Centered Exploration of ACTS



MIKE COSPER



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ABOUT THE GOSPEL PROJECT

Some people see the Bible as a collection of stories with morals for life application. But it's so much more. Sure, the Bible has some stories in it, but it's also full of poetry, history, codes of law and civilization, songs, prophecy, letters—even a love letter. When you tie it all together, something remarkable happens. A story is revealed. One story. The story of redemption through Jesus. This is *The Gospel Project*.

When we begin to see the Bible as the story of redemption through Jesus Christ, God's plan to rescue the world from sin and death, our perspective changes. We no longer look primarily for what the Bible says about us but instead see what it tells us about God and what He has done. After all, it's the gospel that saves us, and when we encounter Jesus in the pages of Scripture, the gospel works on us, transforming us into His image. We become God's gospel project.

ABOUT THE WRITERS



MIKE COSPER

Mike Cospers is the founder and director of Harbor Media, where he develops podcasts that help Christians navigate a post-Christian world. Previously he served for 16 years as one of the founding pastors of Sojourn Community Church in Louisville, Kentucky, where he oversaw Sojourn Music—a collective of musicians writing songs for the local church. He is the author of four books, including (most recently) *Recapturing the Wonder*.

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

Welcome to *The Gospel Project*, a gospel-centered small-group study that dives deep into the things of God, lifts up Jesus, focuses on the grand story of Scripture, and drives participants to be on mission. This small-group Bible study provides opportunities to study the Bible and to encounter the living Christ. *The Gospel Project* provides you with tools and resources to purposefully study God's Word and to grow in the faith and knowledge of God's Son. And what's more, you can do so in the company of others, encouraging and building up one another. Here are some things to remember that will help you maximize the usefulness of this resource:

GATHER A GROUP. We grow in the faith best in community with other believers, as we love, encourage, correct, and challenge one another. The life of a disciple of Christ was never meant to be lived alone, in isolation.

PRAY. Pray regularly for your group members.

PREPARE. This resource includes the Bible study content, three devotionals, and discussion questions for each session. Work through the session and devotionals in preparation for each group session. Take notes and record your own questions. Also consider the follow-up questions so you are ready to participate in and add to the discussion, bringing up your own notes and questions where appropriate.

RESOURCE YOURSELF. Make good use of the additional resources available on the Web at gospelproject.com/additionalresources and search for this specific title. Download a podcast. Read a blog post. Be intentional about learning from others in the faith. For tips on how to better lead groups or additional ideas for leading this Bible study, visit: ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject.

GROUP TIME. Gather together with your group to discuss the session and devotional content. Work through the follow-up questions and your own questions. Discuss the material and the implications for the lives of believers and the mission to which we have been called.

OVERFLOW. Remember... *The Gospel Project* is not just a Bible study. *We* are the project. The gospel is working on us. Don't let your preparation time be simply about the content. Let the truths of God's Word soak in as you study. Let God work on your heart first, and then pray that He will change the hearts of the other people in your group.



SESSION 1

THE SPIRIT COMES

“If the love of God poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, who is given to us, is able to make of many souls but one soul and of many hearts but one heart, how much more are the Father and the Son and Holy Spirit but one God, one Light, one Principle?”¹

AUGUSTINE

INDIVIDUAL STUDY

On a gorgeous spring day about a decade ago, I found a gift on my front porch. I had been out walking my old dog when I found it—a simple brown paper gift bag containing a loaf of really great bread, butter, jam, some pricey cheeses, and a book, also wrapped in brown paper. It was genuinely one of the most thoughtful gifts I’ve ever received, and it clearly came from someone who knew me well. This person knew I liked weird modern fiction, crusty bread, and good butter. He or she knew where I lived and that it was my birthday.

Gifts are powerful things. The trouble with my gift, though, was that it was anonymous. Whoever gave it to me did not leave a card, a signature, nor any clear signs as to who it came from. My wife and I puzzled over it that evening as we tore the bread into pieces and smeared it with butter and strawberry preserves. “Who sent it?” we asked a thousand times. Neither of us had a clue, nor do we know to this day.

What gift story do you have to tell—about a gift received or a gift given?

What are the pros and cons of an anonymous gift? Of a gift from a known giver?

Unlike my anonymous gift, we don’t have to ask who sent the gift of the gospel. The gospel not only comes from God, it’s spread by God’s own handiwork. While the Book of Acts communicates the spread of the gospel from “Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8) through the apostles and the churches they planted, the primary Actor in the Book of Acts—spreading the gospel, building up the church, and healing the sick—is God Himself, specifically in the person of the Holy Spirit, giving gifts of life and redemption and advancing God’s kingdom.

Not only does God reconcile us to Himself in Christ’s death and promise us eternal life in His resurrection, He gives us the greatest gift we can imagine in the Holy Spirit—the gift of Himself. The Holy Spirit comes to indwell every believer in Christ, to empower the spread of the gospel throughout the world, and to build the community of faith. He has come to point sinners to Christ and to strengthen Christ-followers for Christlike living in the world and to the ends of the earth.

1

The Spirit Indwells Believers

During Jesus' final days on earth, both before His crucifixion and up to His ascension, He began promising the disciples that another Counselor would come to carry on His work. He said, "If you love me, you will keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever. He is the Spirit of truth. The world is unable to receive him because it doesn't see him or know him. But you do know him, because he remains with you and will be in you" (John 14:15-17).

This is a wonderfully trinitarian statement—the Son asks the Father to send the Counselor. But before we get the wrong idea and somehow think that these three Persons are somehow independent of one another, Jesus adds, "I will not leave you as orphans; I am coming to you" (John 14:18). Just as the Son and the Father are one, the Son and the Spirit are one. So though Jesus goes away to the Father, the Counselor comes and Jesus is still present.

Such is the mystery of the Trinity as revealed in Scripture. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are distinct yet one at the same time, and we always need to hold these two revealed truths together—God is one; God is Trinity. We can't make sense of this. It's not a riddle to solve but a wonder to behold in faith.

So when Jesus promised the Holy Spirit, He was also promising Himself. This makes sense of the fact that Scripture tells us Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father (see Eph. 1:20; Heb. 8:1; 12:2) and He is with us always, "to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). When the Holy Spirit is sent to us, God is present, and that, of course, means that Jesus Himself is present with us.

How should the revelation of God as Trinity shape the way we pray?

The way we worship?

Here's how the Book of Acts describes the coming of the Holy Spirit:

¹ When the day of Pentecost had arrived, they were all together in one place. ² Suddenly a sound like that of a violent rushing wind came from heaven, and it filled the whole house where they were staying. ³ They saw tongues like flames of fire that separated and rested on each one of them. ⁴ Then they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them.

ACTS 2:1-4

How bewildering it all must have been for the disciples as they obeyed Jesus' final words. For the next ten days, the disciples gathered together in an upstairs room in Jerusalem and prayed and waited for the Father's promise to be fulfilled. (See Acts 1:4-5,12-14.) And then, without warning, the Spirit rushed into the world, rushed into the room, and rushed into their hearts as He manifested Himself in what appeared like flickering flames of fire resting on each one of those present in the room.

In the coming of the Spirit, Jesus' promise to be with us always makes sense, as does the prophet Joel's promise that one day God would pour out His Spirit on "all humanity" (Joel 2:28). Likewise, the coming of the Spirit reveals the unique role that Christ's followers will play in the world—not merely as a faithful group that exists to remember what Jesus did but as God's agents for good in the world and as the very vessels God will use to carry out His mission. God's kingdom will continue to advance as God continues His work through His church in His world through His Holy Spirit.

What thoughts or expectations do you have regarding the filling of the Holy Spirit in a believer's life?

How should the indwelling of the Spirit change the way believers live?

2

The Spread of the Gospel

The apostle Peter, filled with the Spirit, stood before a massive crowd and preached this sermon:

²² "Fellow Israelites, listen to these words: This Jesus of Nazareth was a man attested to you by God with miracles, wonders, and signs that God did among you through him, just as you yourselves know. ²³ Though he was delivered up according to God's determined plan and foreknowledge, you used lawless people to nail him to a cross and kill him. ²⁴ God raised him up, ending the pains of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by death. ²⁵ For David says of him:

I saw the Lord ever before me;
because he is at my right hand,
I will not be shaken.

²⁶ Therefore my heart is glad
and my tongue rejoices.

Moreover, my flesh will rest in hope,
²⁷ because you will not abandon me in Hades
or allow your holy one to see decay.

²⁸ You have revealed the paths of life to me;
you will fill me with gladness
in your presence.

²⁹ "Brothers and sisters, I can confidently speak to you about the patriarch David: He is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day.

³⁰ Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn an oath to him to seat one of his descendants on his throne. ³¹ Seeing what was to come, he spoke concerning the resurrection of the Messiah: He was not abandoned in Hades, and his flesh did not experience decay.

³² "God has raised this Jesus; we are all witnesses of this. ³³ Therefore, since he has been exalted to the right hand of God and has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit, he has poured out what you both see and hear.

³⁴ For it was not David who ascended into the heavens, but he himself says:

The Lord declared to my Lord,
'Sit at my right hand

³⁵ until I make your enemies your footstool.'

³⁶ "Therefore let all the house of Israel know with certainty that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah."

³⁷ When they heard this, they were pierced to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles: "Brothers, what should we do?"

³⁸ Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is for you and for your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call." ⁴⁰ With many other words he testified and strongly urged them, saying, "Be saved from this corrupt generation!"

ACTS 2:22-40

What implications should this sermon have on how we share the gospel?

Peter couldn't contain himself. He nearly exploded with this sermon, urgently pointing to Jesus as the Messiah. But this wasn't simply Peter talking here, it was Peter filled with the Spirit.

What we learn by looking at the Book of Acts is that the Spirit compels us to speak out. The mission of the church is a reflection of the heart of the Holy Spirit, who is more eager than anyone to celebrate the work of the Father and the Son.

Knowing this should dramatically shift the way we think about sharing the gospel. If you're like me, you might find yourself struggling at times to speak up, to know when to share your faith, or to initiate conversations about Jesus. Often techniques are suggested for making those conversations easier. But perhaps the easiest way to be more bold in sharing the gospel is by seeking to be filled with the Spirit. (See Eph. 5:18-19; cf. Acts 13:50-52.)

What are some struggles that keep Christians from sharing the gospel with others?

How does the filling of the Holy Spirit overcome these struggles and empower our evangelism?

3

The Spirit Builds Community

When the Spirit comes, He brings life and growth, and this growth resembles that of a tree with its branches and roots. On one hand, the kingdom spreads into the world in visible, extensive ways characteristic of the church's mission. The momentum of this growth is overflowing and outward. But the kingdom also grows in often unseen ways with an inward momentum resulting in depth, stability, and holy relationships. This inward growth was also visible in Acts 2.

⁴¹ So those who accepted his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand people were added to them.

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.

⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and signs were being performed through the apostles. ⁴⁴ Now all the believers were together and held all things in common. ⁴⁵ They sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple, and broke bread from house to house. They ate their food with joyful and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. Every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

ACTS 2:41-47

In this passage, there are many signs of God's grace and God's work. There are signs and wonders, referring to miracles such as healing the sick and casting out demons that characterized both Jesus' ministry and the ministry of the apostles, but there are more subtle miracles as well. These believers shared their possessions, they sold what they had in excess in order to give away the proceeds to those in need among them, and they met regularly and shared meals.

This kind of abundant, intense, and dedicated community life should be seen for the miracle it is. This sort of thing doesn't just happen. Most of the time, when you force people to live in tight, communal circumstances, the opposite occurs. Proximity leads to conflicts, and conflicts lead to strengthened borders. "Good fences make good neighbors," as they say, and that's because there's less potential for conflict when what's mine is mine and what's yours is yours.

In Acts 2, however, this newly formed community presses into one another's lives, and the boundaries around possessions and wealth disappear. Moved by the Spirit, each believer's

interests shifted from self to the good of the community of faith, and they began sharing all they had. They were sharing meals, sharing space, and sharing life.

When the Holy Spirit takes up residence in our hearts, we begin to overflow with love for God and love for our neighbors, especially those who share our faith. These twin loves for God and others fuel the whole of the Christian life. It is love of God that leads us to bear witness to the gospel around the world, and it is love of our brothers and sisters that leads us to develop rich, deeply committed relationships with God's people.

Too often we emphasize one love over the other. When we focus only on the community of faith, we can lose touch with the wonder of God—sharing the gospel keeps that wonder fresh and alive in our hearts. Likewise, when we focus only on bearing witness to Jesus without developing any real relationships with other Christians, we find ourselves without accountability and often lacking the humility and gentleness that come as a result of being deeply known and deeply loved by the people around us.

What's displayed in Acts 2 comes as a result of the gift of God's Spirit. It cannot be controlled or manipulated or manufactured. It only comes when open hearts, stirred to faith by the gospel, receive this gift from the Father and the Son and are filled by Him. And so we seek this Spirit-transformed life not merely by imitating these behaviors but by seeking God's presence, by asking Him to fill us with His Spirit and renew our love for Him, His Word, and His gospel.

How have you experienced the deep community of faith in the name of Jesus and through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit?

What are some ways we can contribute to this Spirit-filled community of faith?



GROUP STUDY



Warm Up

If you've not heard this Bible story before, you will be mesmerized by its details. If you have heard this story all your life, then try to re-imagine it, blow the dust off, and hear it afresh. Remember what had happened in the previous few weeks to the disciples. Not long before, Jesus had arrived in Jerusalem like a King arriving for His coronation. The whole city greeted Him, hailing the new King of the Jews. A few days later, however, He died, hung on a cross with a sign bearing the same title. But three days after that, He rose from the dead.

The disciples seemed bewildered by all that had taken place. Rome remained in control of Jerusalem. There would be no new Israel, no freedom from the tyranny of their oppressors. And yet, so much more had happened. Jesus had risen from the dead. They'd shared meals and conversations with Him. They'd touched His scars. They'd seen Him appear behind locked doors in a glorified body that was at once recognizable and unrecognizable, familiar and new. And they'd seen Him taken up into the heavens with the promise that He would come again in the same way. But first, the Spirit would come as He had promised.

How would you explain the purpose of the Holy Spirit in your life?

In what ways can you be sure you're being led by the Holy Spirit?

"If the love of God pervades our hearts, without a doubt it will soon engender affection for our neighbor as well."²

BEDE

Discussion

1. How should the revelation of God as Trinity shape the way we pray?
The way we worship?
2. What thoughts or expectations do you have regarding the filling of the Holy Spirit in a believer's life?
3. How should the indwelling of the Spirit change the way believers live?
4. What implications should this sermon have on how we share the gospel?
5. What are some struggles that keep Christians from sharing the gospel with others?
6. How does the filling of the Holy Spirit overcome these struggles and empower our evangelism?
7. How have you experienced the deep community of faith in the name of Jesus and through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit?
8. What are some ways we can contribute to this Spirit-filled community of faith?

Conclusion

While receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit is a once-and-for-all occasion when we put our faith in Jesus, being filled with the Spirit is the lifelong responsibility of the believer, turning to God in faith and joy and learning to live with a deeper and more abiding trust in Him. As we are filled, then, we should overflow—to our friends, our neighbors, our families, and more—with the love and joy that come from abiding in the gospel of our Savior. This is our greatest way of bearing witness: not the begrudging “I-should-do-this-though-I-feel-awkward” kind of evangelism but the natural reaction of a joy-filled heart to redemption. This comes only as a gift, only as we’re filled with the Spirit, and only as we turn our own attention to this good news.

Spend some time praying this for you and for your group:

“God, thank You for Your Holy Spirit who empowers us to be Your witnesses on earth. Help us during times when we are called to do things we aren’t able to do on our own to remember it is You who provides us with all that we need through Your Spirit. May we always trust in the Spirit who changes us to be more like You.”

1. Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 39.5, quoted in *Acts*, ed. Francis Martin, with Evan Smith, vol. 5 in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament* (IVP, 2014) [WORDsearch].
2. Bede, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 2.44, quoted in *Acts*, ed. Francis Martin, with Evan Smith, vol. 5 in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament* [WORDsearch].
3. Henry Blackaby and Melvin Blackaby, *Experiencing the Spirit: The Power of Pentecost Every Day* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2009) [eBook].

