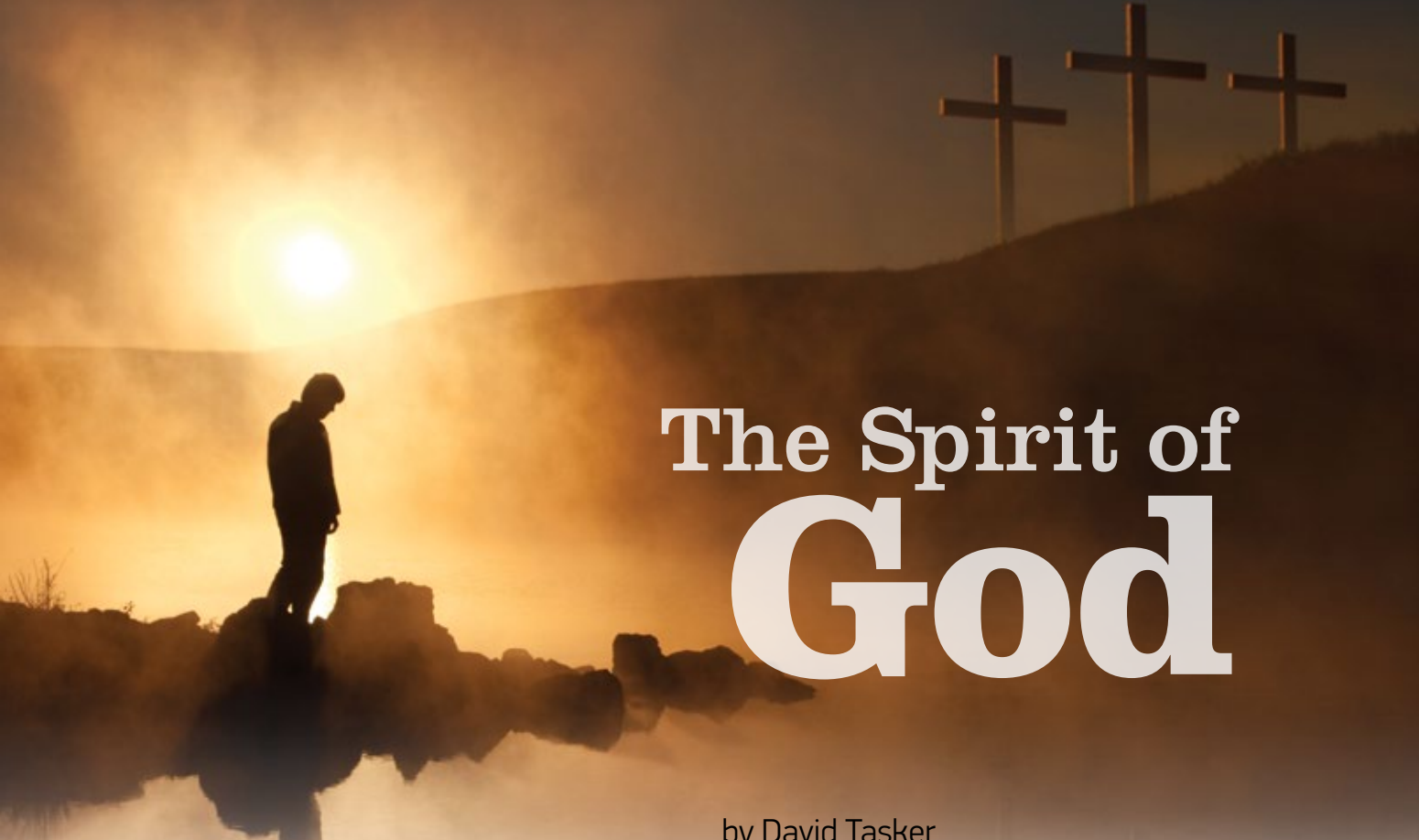




The Spirit of God

by David Tasker

AS WE LEARNED IN THE FIRST ARTICLE OF THIS two-part series, the Holy Spirit is referred to more than 100 times in the Old Testament in a number of ways: the Spirit of God (*Elohim*)¹; the Spirit of the Lord (*YHWH*)²; and simply, the Spirit.³ In my first piece, we focused on instances where simply the Spirit is mentioned. In this piece we'll focus on the 44 instances that mention the Spirit of God or the Spirit of the Lord. By studying the Old Testament record, we can get a clearer and deeper understanding of who the Holy Spirit is and what He does.

The Spirit of God Associated with Creation

We first encounter the Hebrew word for Spirit, *Ruach*, in the phrase "the Spirit of God" in the second verse of Genesis. Here the Spirit of God "hovers" or "flutters" (*rakhaf*) over the surface of the waters in the process of creation. This is significant as it links the Holy Spirit with Creation—the one event that separates God from all other gods worshipped in the ancient (or modern) world.

In addition, the action of the Spirit of God "hovering" over the waters places the Holy Spirit not only in the context of creation, but of salvation also. The verb *rakhaf* is expressed here in an intensive form and the only other time in Scripture the verb is used this way is as a metaphor of God redeeming His people from Egypt in the form of an eagle stirring up its nest and hovering (*rakhaf*) over its young (Deuteronomy 32:11). This picture of nurture—and ultimately of salvation in the Exodus story—introduces the

Holy Spirit in the context of two main functions of divinity—creation and salvation.

Empowering Leaders

Other uses of the expression "Spirit of God" (*Elohim*) are in the context of empowering leaders, the most common of whom (in eight references) is Saul, the first Israelite king. The next highest occurrence focuses on Bezaleel (twice), the artisan chosen to craft the sacred objects of the tabernacle in the wilderness. Five other characters endowed by the Holy Spirit are Joseph, Balaam, Azariah, Ezekiel and Zechariah.

Saul's connection with the Holy Spirit is quite interesting, maybe even bizarre. Soon after Samuel the prophet anoints Saul as Israel's first king (1 Samuel 10:1), he meets up with a group of prophets and starts prophesying with them (v 10), just as Samuel had predicted (v 6). This experience at the beginning of Saul's reign is paralleled to another near its end. After David's wife (and Saul's daughter), Michal, helps David escape Saul's murderous plot (1 Samuel 19:11–17), Saul sends out a group of soldiers to arrest David, but they meet a group of prophets who are prophesying, and the Spirit of God "came upon" the soldiers and they start prophesying too (v 20). This prophetic activity stops their assassination attempt, and on hearing this, Saul sends another group to capture David—with the same outcome (v 21). After a third attempt (with the same results—v 21), Saul goes himself (v 22) but he too is overpowered by the Spirit of God and instead of murdering his young rival, ends up prophesying (v 23).

However, Saul does not stop at mere prophecy. He

strips naked, continues prophesying in Samuel's presence, and ends up laying prostrate on the ground for the rest of that day and all night too (v 24). Again, a murderous plot is neutralised by the Holy Spirit, overwhelming a man with a dramatic religious experience. This seems in character with Saul. He swings from an insane desire to murder David to fervent devotion of God in harmony with his unbalanced character. The remaining references to the Spirit of God in association with Saul describe a "distressing spirit"—literally a "bad spirit of God" (1 Samuel 16:15, 16, 23; and 18:10).

Bezaleel is twice described as "filled" with the Spirit of God (Exodus 31:3; 35:31), and in both occasions it describes his "wisdom and understanding, in knowledge and all manner of workmanship" as he crafted the intricacies of the wilderness sanctuary. It is also in meticulous attention to detail that Pharaoh praises Joseph and subsequently chooses him to be his prime minister (Genesis 41:38). Being filled with the Spirit in these instances provided for Bezaleel superior skills that left the legacy of a beautifully furnished and equipped sanctuary, and for Joseph an inspired leadership that not only ensured the survival of his family, but also ensured the coming of the future Messiah.

Other uses of the phrase "Spirit of God" apply to various prophets who were "moved" by God. Ezekiel describes the way that the Spirit of God picks him up and takes him in vision to Chaldea to see the captives there (Ezekiel 11:24). Balaam, the reluctant non-Israelite prophet, feels compelled to go against the wishes of the king who bribes him to prophesy against the Exodus wanderers, and instead blesses them when the Spirit of God "came upon him" (Numbers 24:2). Azariah speaks words of hope to the discouraged King Asa, urging him to be strong and rid the land of idolatry (2 Chronicles 15:1). Zechariah (the son of Jehoiada the priest, not the author of the book of the Bible) also speaks bravely to the people when the Spirit of God comes upon him (2 Chronicles 24:20) during a dark part of their history.

The Spirit of the Lord (YHWH) Empowering Leaders

Another expression used, the Spirit of the Lord (YHWH), is more common. It's first used to describe the empowerment given by God to the "judges" in order to deliver God's people. When the Spirit of the Lord comes upon them, Othniel prevails against the Mesopotamian King Cushan-risha-thaim (Judges 3:10); Gideon, son of an apostate people (6:27–30), summons a large army from among them (v 34), but uses only 300 to crush the Midianites; Jephthah defeats the Ammonites convincingly (11:29); and Samson is given great strength to overcome the Philistines (13:25; 14:6,19; and 15:14).

The prophets also speak of the Spirit of the Lord empowering people. Examples include the "Rod from the stem of Jesse" (the Messianic "Servant of the Lord") with the seven-fold spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, the fear of the Lord and of righteous judgement (Isaiah 11:2–5). Micah parallels this when he asserts that he is empowered by the Spirit of the Lord with "justice and might to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin" (Micah 3:8). The whole point of the action of the Spirit of the Lord in these contexts is to assure the people of deliverance (Isaiah 59:19), and of rest and security in the face of what threatens them (Isaiah 63:14).

We also observe that the Spirit of the Lord moves upon people, giving them a prophetic voice (eg Ezekiel 11:5; 2 Chronicles 20:14). And after the insignificant shepherd boy David is anointed to be king, the Spirit of the Lord comes upon him from that moment forward (1 Samuel 16:13), and for the rest of his life David recognises that the Spirit of the Lord speaks through him (2 Samuel 23:2).

Conclusion

The description of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament is indeed very rich. He is active in creation and

redemption. He is foremost in teaching, warning, pleading and striving in order to prevent the dire consequences of human rebellion. The Holy Spirit limits the effects of divine judgement "raining" upon dry ground to bring nourishment and restoration to the land and to the soul of the people.

Finally the Spirit is heavily involved in empowering people to do the impossible—shy people are enabled to be fearless leaders (eg Moses, Joshua, Saul and David) and artisans are inspired to build and design exceptional beauty (eg the sanctuary). In addition, when times become tough and political or religious leaders do not give clear enough leadership, God empowers both men and women to become His mouthpiece to warn an otherwise bewitched people (eg the 70 elders, Elisha, Ezekiel and Isaiah) and to woo disenchanted people back to the only One who can save them—Jesus.



1. Genesis 1:2; 41:38; Exodus 31:3; 35:31; Numbers 24:2; 1 Samuel 10:10; 11:6; 16:15, 16, 23; 18:10; 19:20, 23; Job 33:4; Ezekiel 11:24; 2 Chronicles 15:1; and 24:20.
2. Judges 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14; 1 Samuel 10:6; 16:13, 14; 19:9; 2 Samuel 23:2; 1 Kings 18:12; 19:11; 22:24; 2 Kings 2:16; Isaiah 11:2; 40:7, 13; 59:19; 63:14; Ezekiel 11:5; 37:1; Hosea 13:15; Micah 2:7; 3:8; 2 Chronicles 18:23; and 20:14.
3. Genesis 6:3; Numbers 11:17, 25, 26, 29; 27:18; Numbers 27:18; 2 Kings 2:9, 15; Isaiah 4:4; 30:1; 32:15; 34:16; 37:7; 42:1, 3; 48:16; 59:21; 63:10, 11; Ezekiel 1:20, 21; 2:2; 3:12, 14, 24; 8:3; 11:1, 24; 43:5; Joel 2:28, 29; Haggai 2:5; Zechariah 4:6; 6:8; 7:12; 12:10; Malachi 2:15; Psalms 51:11, 12; 104:30; 106:33; 139:7; 143:10; Job 26:13; 33:4; Proverbs 1:23; Nehemiah 9:20, 30; and 1 Chronicles 28:12.

Dr David Tasker heads up the South Pacific Division's Biblical Research Committee.