

God's Spirit

Number 1 in the series *Spirits in the Material World*

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Charles River Church

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Charles River Church

Powered by God for life.

*For the Bible text for this talk Click
(or control-click) [Ezekiel 1:1-28](#)
(You must be connected to the Internet)*

Everybody seems to use the word "spirit" or "spiritual", but what do people mean by it? You might say that a person is spiritual, like Bono, or that a place is spiritual, like the Vietnam Memorial Wall.

You might say, "Physically I'm fine, but spiritually I'm stuck." You can have team spirit, Christmas spirit, evil spirits, American Spirit tobacco, and distilled spirits. I guess some of these examples point out that the word "spirit" can be misused. When you say someone is spiritual, I don't think you mean they are smoking tobacco or drinking whisky.

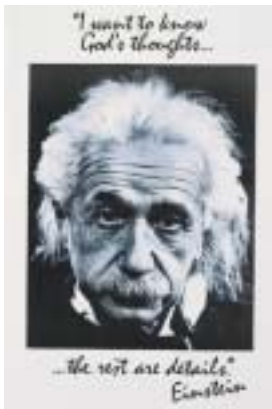
But I think the word "spirit" does mean something real most of the time. Let me take a crack at defining it: the spiritual is whatever there is that is not captured by the material. The spiritual is whatever there is that is not captured by the material. Take for example, team spirit. There is a material reality to every team. A cycling team, for instance, has bicycles, each with a weight and size, gear ratios, and rolling resistance of the tires. The team has finances, sponsors, vehicles, contracts, logos, a name. A cycling team has riders, with certain physical characteristics, such as height, weight, muscle strength, maximum oxygen uptake, lactic acid disposal rates. The riders have mental and emotional characteristics too, such as intelligence, temper, compassion, competitiveness. Yet even if you could measure and account for all these things, and thousands of other aspects, you still wouldn't have captured the spirit of the team. Two teams could be very similar in all material aspects, and still have very different spirits.



Now it's important to be rigorous that the spirit does not refer to the material things that merely *have not* been measured yet or that technology isn't good enough yet to measure. Spirit refers to things that *cannot* be captured by the material. One hundred years ago, people couldn't measure oxygen uptake, and they might have been tempted to say that one bicyclist was more "spirited" than another, when the real truth was that that one had a higher maximum oxygen uptake. That would have been a mistake. What is genuinely spiritual is not the material things that people are currently ignorant about, but instead the spiritual is that which is always beyond capture by the material. A psychologist time-traveling from the year 10,000 might be able to measure the molecular basis for every personality trait of Bono, but that still wouldn't capture Bono's spirit. Do you see what I mean?

Now, feel free to disagree with me about this. You might say there is no reality that cannot be captured by the material world, that if you could measure everything about Bono's brain, you would have captured his spirit. That a cycling team is nothing more than the sum of its riders, bikes, equipment, sponsors, fans, etc. You could be right. But you would be making a faith statement, just as much as I am making a faith statement by claiming there is a spiritual reality. There's no proof one way or the other whether all of reality can ever be captured by materiality. So one's attitude towards the "spiritual" is largely an act of faith. Are you with me so far?

Science certainly doesn't prove anything one way or the other, because by definition science only measures the material world. Science can measure the material world, but science can't possibly say anything about whether the material world is all there is to reality. Most of the great physicists have clearly recognized and stated this fact. Einstein believed in God, he believed that reality is deeper than what can be measured. And in fact, there is one reality that has been detected and observed by science, but which science cannot and does not claim to explain: the creation of the universe. Before the big bang there was no material world. After the big bang there was. Not only was there no stuff before the big bang, there were also no laws of physics, no force of gravity, no fine structure constant, no space, no time. If you ask an astrophysicist about the big bang, they will tell you it was a "singularity", that is something that only happened once, without material cause and is inaccessible to scientific explanation. What I'm saying is that origin of the material world is not captured by the material world. The material world cannot explain, cannot predict, cannot cause — cannot capture — how the material world itself came to be. That's a fact.



Therefore, it makes sense to me, that if you want to look for the spiritual, a good place to start would be with the creation of the universe. Or, I should say, with the creator of the universe. The material world doesn't have a material cause, therefore if it has any cause at all, it's cause is spiritual. The very 1st line of the Bible puts it like this: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a spirit from God swept over the face of the water." (Genesis 1:1-2) If there is a God, then God's Spirit is the spiritual reality beyond (or at least before) the material reality all around you. God's Spirit is the original spirit. God's spirit defines what it means to be spiritual, what it means to be beyond what can be captured by the material world. If people are spiritual, they are beyond capture by the material world, in something like the same way God is. There's something about us, that you can't know just by knowing the arrangement of all the particles and forces in our bodies. As the Bible puts it, a few lines later, "God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27). Or as Sting put it, "We are spirits in the material world."



OK, if God's Spirit is the epitome of what it means to be spiritual, let's take a look at God's Spirit. On June 25, 593 BC, according to the Book of Ezekiel, a man named Ezekiel experienced the awesome presence of God's Spirit while he was standing by the Chebar Canal in the city of Tel Abib in the country of Babylonia, and it rocked his world. Considering what God's Spirit did the first time he appeared — causing the big bang — you might expect that God's Spirit would make a big impact on Ezekiel's life. He did, and you can read all about it in the rest

of the Book of Ezekiel. But at this point, in chapter 1, Ezekiel is struggling merely to describe the experience. But describing God is hard to do because all the words people possess are rooted in material existence. Human words are about things. God's Spirit is not a thing. Human words are inadequate to capture God's Spirit.

So Ezekiel does the best he can with human words. First of all he makes it clear that he did not see God's Spirit. He knows that you can't see something spiritual using material eyes. What he had was a vision. You can't see God, but God can give you a vision of God. Big difference. It takes God's eyes to see God, and God lent Ezekiel God's eyes for a while. Even so, what Ezekiel was not of God's Spirit directly, which would be completely beyond human comprehension, but a vision of God's Spirit's *glory* (or "glow" or "manifestation"). And even though Ezekiel was only seeing the *appearance* of the *likeness* of the *glory* of God, human language still wasn't adequate to describe it. Instead it was *something like* glowing amber, *something like* a wheel in a wheel, *something like* a throne, and so on. Imagine describing chocolate to someone who has no sense of taste. Whatever it was that Ezekiel saw — the appearance of the likeness of the glory of God — it was ultimately indescribable, uncontrollable, untamable.

If you want to plug into the wow factor of God. take the handout home with you and read it — out loud — every night this week, Picture it. Talk about. Imagine what it was like for Ezekiel. Have you ridden on the Tower of Terror, the Supreme Scream, the Vortex and Space Mountain? Your gut still ain't been grabbed like the glory of God's gonna grab it. You ever been in a steel mill and looked into 40 tons of molten iron? Not even hot! Avalanche? Volcano? Hurricane? Sideshows. God's show is the real show. Yet God's Spirit is not just beyond the big and powerful. God's Spirit is more precise than an atomic clock, God's Spirit is



more graceful than the corps of the Bolshoi ballet. God's Spirit is more gentle than the spring rain watering the earth. God's Spirit is beyond anything you can know or experience or imagine. Sometimes it's good to get in touch with

something like glowing amber	v.4
something like four living creatures	5
appearance of human form	5
like the sole of a calf's foot	7
like burnished bronze	7
appearance of their faces	10
looked like burning coals of fire	13
like torches moving to and fro	13
appearance of the wheels	16
like the gleaming of beryl	16
something like a wheel in a wheel	16
something like a dome	22
like the sound of mighty waters	24
like the thunder of the Almighty	24
like the sound of an army	24
something like a throne	26
like sapphire	26
likeness of a throne	26
seemed like a human form	26
appeared like the loins	27
looked like fire	27
looked like the loins	27
looked like fire	27
like the bow in a cloud	28
appearance of the splendor	28
appearance of the likeness of the glory of God	28

grandeur of God. When you start getting into spirituality, you are not playing with Legos anymore. Your getting in touch with ultimate reality. That's the God I want to get in touch with.

Another way the Bible likes to say this is that God is mighty. That's logical. If God created the universe, then God can overcome anything in the universe that stands against God. God can overcome fear. God can overcome death. God can overcome the bitterness you feel because of the disappointments in your life. God can overcome depression. God can overcome poverty. God can overcome shame. God can overcome tyranny, racism, war, gangs, political corruption. The civil rights workers believed that they were doing what God wanted them to do, and so they sang "We shall overcome." They did.

If you're a follower of Jesus, or if you're seeking God, it would be a kind of missing the point to overlook God's mightiness.



Sometimes people seem to think that God is the reward for giving a good life. No, God is the power to live life well. Ask for God's Spirit when you need someone mighty, not when you need a pat on the head.

We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Deuteronomy 6:21

Our God—the great and mighty and awesome God.... Nehemiah 9:32

Who is the King of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty. Job 36:5

God is so mighty, that it would be frightening if it weren't for the fact that God is also holy. What does "holy" mean? You might have heard that the basic meaning of "holy" is "separated" or "set aside". I don't buy that. (I am not making this up — I did my research in the Interpreters' Dictionary of the Bible, the New Bible Dictionary, and the Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament.) "Holy" can mean that, but even more deeply it means "clean" and "pure". In other words, to say that God's Spirit is holy means that God is "totally good and entirely without evil"¹ And because God is holy, you can trust God to us his Spirit's might against evil and for good all the time. God is not like the mythical Greek and Roman gods, who sometimes used their powers to protect cities, heal people, and restore lost lovers, but other times used their power to seduce girls, destroy justice, and torment people they were jealous of. God is not like that. God is holy. God is against only evil. God is for only good.

For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness 1 Thessalonians 4:7

the Lord of hosts is exalted by justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy by righteousness Isaiah 5:16

"I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "They are plans for good and not for harm." Jeremiah 29:11

What is God against, then? God is against disease. God is against poverty, God is against oppression. God is against addiction. What is God for? God is for healing. God is for children having enough to eat. God is for a society that treats people equally. God is for you being freed from the patterns that keep you shackled. God is for you having

meaningful work. God is for you feeling a peace that is deeper than any peace you've ever felt before. God is for you. God is for you!. You can trust God because God is holy.

If God is mighty, do you need anything in your life that is beyond your power to achieve? I want my work to amount to something. I want Charles River Church to succeed, but it is beyond my power to achieve that. And if God is holy, do you need anything that is within your power to achieve, but when you do it, you don't always do it clean, pure, totally good and entirely without evil? I have the power to make good Powerpoint presentations, but wonder if I've ever made a presentation that was completely clean, pure, totally good and entirely without evil. (Actually I know I've made some presentations that weren't mighty either!) I have the power to hug my children, but I wonder if I've ever even hugged my children in a way that was completely clean, pure, totally good and entirely without evil.

And God is mighty not just for me, but for the world. Does the world need anything mighty to happen? Does the world need anything totally good and entirely without evil to happen? Read today's newspaper. Walk the streets of Boston or your neighborhood. Listen to your friends and neighbors. Does Boston, does Massachusetts, does America, does the world need anything mighty and holy?

The practical application of Ezekiel's vision of something like coals of fire, and thunder and lightning, and face, wings, wheels in wheels, and the sapphire throne, is to ask God's mighty, holy Spirit to be active in your life and in our world.. Now, look, I know that if you ask God for something, you don't always receive it. Sometimes you ask for something that not good (not holy) — whether you know it or not — and God's probably not going to give you that. Sometimes you ask for something that is good, but you still don't get it, even healing from disease or prevention of

¹ Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, entry 1990.

natural disaster. I don't know why, that's a question I'd like to ask God (and I guess I should). I'm going to talk more about this next week. But I ask you, is it because God is not mighty enough to do what you need?

So what am I saying about prayer? Just this: Ask for what you think you need, to the best of your ability to discern. Ask for what you think the world needs. Ask specifically. Ask for a job. Ask to get out of this spiritual rut I'm in. Ask to end this bad relationship. Ask to begin a new, good relationship. Ask to be married. Ask for peace in



Darfur — please do that this week. God's answer may be to change *you* more than to change your circumstances God's answer to your prayer

transform you spiritually as much as materially. But in any case, God's Spirit is waiting for you to ask.

I'd like to see Charles River Church ask more fully for God's mighty and holy Spirit. I'd like to see us become a community of friends asking together for God's Spirit to come mightily among us. For some reason, asking God's Spirit as a community seems to be mightier than only asking God individually. Maybe as we begin to care more for each other, become part of each other's lives, we will become the place where God's answers can happen. If you're asking God for deep friendships, good relationships, help with parenting your children, release from bad habits, what if God's Spirit made this a place to receive God's answers, a place where God's Spirit happened? And I'm asking you to think and pray about during this series on spirits in the material world. Is God inviting you, and is God longing for Charles River Church, to ask for God's Spirit in a mighty and totally good way?

Everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds.

Luke 11:10

Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive

Matthew 21:22

You do not receive because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures

James 4:2-3



Questions

- Is there anything you need that would take God's might to achieve? Anything the world needs?
- Can you imagine what it would look like to receive it?
- Do you think God has a role for you in asking for or receiving it? Does God have a role for Charles River Church?