

THE HOLY SPIRIT

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Joel 2:28–29; Luke 11:9–13; John 3:5–8; 14:16–17, 26; 15:26–27; 16:7–15; Acts 2:1–21, 32–33; Romans 8:1–17, 26–27; 1 Corinthians 12:1–13; Ephesians 1:13–14; 3:14–21; 4:1–6, 30

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

It is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God. (Rom. 8:16)

Daily Bible Readings

M	Dec. 22	Zech. 4:1–7	The Spirit Accomplishes God's Will
T	Dec. 23	1 Cor. 12:1–13	The Spirit Bestows Gifts
W	Dec. 24	Isa. 11:1–9	The Spirit Gives Wisdom and Understanding
Th	Dec. 25	Matt. 1:18–25	The Spirit Works in Jesus' Birth
F	Dec. 26	Acts 7:51–60	The Spirit Reveals God's Glory
Sa	Dec. 27	Ps. 104:24, 29–35	The Spirit Creates and Renews

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

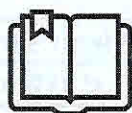
Imagine someone gave you the task of naming twelve enduring beliefs of the Christian faith. Where would you start? In the interest of research, I consulted artificial intelligence, and the results were pretty close to the twelve topics chosen for this study by a cooperative group of intelligent practitioners of faith formation.

You could also look at Christian creeds and confessions as summaries of what we as the church believe. In these creeds, you find an underlying structure that infuses many of them—a trinitarian understanding of God in three persons, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit—who creates, redeems, and sustains the world and the people. In our study, we began with the authority of Scripture as the primary means by which we know God, and the touchstone for all that we will learn. Next, we examined the providential care of God, and then the salvation we have through Christ Jesus. It follows that we turn our attention next to the Holy Spirit.

We have many texts in Scripture that illuminate the power and presence of God's Spirit. Our suggested background readings offer a good taste of them: from the prophet Joel's vision of God's promised Spirit, to the Acts 2 fulfillment of Joel's vision at Pentecost in the giving of the Holy Spirit, to a prayer for the church's unity of the Spirit. Scripture tells us

that God's Spirit hovered over creation from the very beginning, and it isn't done yet. As followers of Jesus, we trust that the Spirit is in and among us, in these in-between times of God's already and not-yet future. To a study of the Spirit, we bring our joys and sorrows, our hopes and doubts, our faith, and our fears. We find that the gift of the Spirit is exactly what we need in the jumble of fullness and frailty.

God our Sustainer, guide our study and our prayers, our hours and our days, as we seek to live in the promise and hope of your Spirit. Amen.



Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

SCRIPTURE

Romans 8:12–14, 26–27

8:12 So then, brothers and sisters, we are obligated, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—¹³for if you live according to the flesh, you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. . . .

²⁶Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words. ²⁷And God, who searches hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

In what is likely one of the last letters he wrote to a church, the apostle Paul gives us reflections in Romans on foundational concepts of grace, righteousness, justification, law, and more. Our printed verses come from a powerful chapter (Rom. 8) that illustrates an undefined trinitarian understanding of God. God as Father, Jesus as Son and savior, and the gift and presence of the Holy Spirit weave throughout the chapter (and the whole letter), intertwined as they are in relationship. If you want the crux of Paul's understanding about the new kind of life available because of Jesus, a read through the whole of Romans 8 would not be wasted time.

For Paul, this new life is life in the Spirit. He uses the language of "flesh" to describe a life without the Spirit. It's tempting to assume Paul means that anything having to do with the physical body is bad, and anything that is spiritual is good. This kind of

dualism has animated thinkers through history. Yet, when he says “flesh,” Paul is thinking not about skin and bones and nerve endings, but about a way of life that is captive to sin. It is a kind of existence, a way of being in the world without reference to the gift of the saving grace of Jesus Christ. “Flesh” is life where we live only for ourselves. Because we are people with bodies, these are bound up in sin’s captivity too. Death gets the final word in a life of the flesh. In contrast, life in the Spirit is free—free from sin and the condemnation that comes with it; and free from the power of death. Because of what God in Christ has done, there is a future hope and new life. When we are led by the indwelling of God’s Holy Spirit, we live as the children of God in the realm of that assurance.

The image of being led by the Spirit brings up memories of the children of God in the wilderness. Their journey to freedom from captivity in Egypt was led not just by Moses, but by God’s gifts of pillars of cloud and fire (Exod. 13:21–22). God has always guided God’s people. For a long time, the law that Moses received and shared in that wilderness served as the faithful way to live in God’s realm. But now, in the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has decisively acted to fulfill the law, and the Holy Spirit guides us in this new way of life.



How would you describe the difference between life in the flesh and life in the Spirit?

A COMMUNITY JOINED IN THE SPIRIT


We often speak about our faith as a private matter. We give thanks for the gift of grace given to us as unique individuals. We may talk about our personal journey of faith. We recite the Apostles’ Creed that begins with the words “I believe,” and we listen with our own ears for a word from God to us in Scripture, sermons, worship, and prayer.

But life in the Spirit, as Paul sees it, and as the church has practiced it, is life in community. The Holy Spirit came to the disciples at Pentecost when they were gathered together. They immediately went out and began sharing the good news of Jesus with others (Acts 2). The Spirit gives gifts to individuals, but they are to be used for the common good, for building up the body of Christ (Rom. 12). Even our Spirit prayers—those groanings that Paul describes in Romans 8:26 as too deep for words—are prayers of the saints joined together in the family of God. While

we may offer our inner prayers of suffering alone, in the middle of a personal dark night of the soul, the very Spirit that meets us there is the same Spirit that connects us with the groanings of all creation (8:22).

Paul uses the image of birth or labor pangs to describe the experience of waiting and groaning for the full realization of God's new realm. It's a powerful image that captures a time in which body and spirit are transforming into an already present but also new reality in which individuals become family. Words like *Abba, Father, sons, children, brothers, sisters, heirs, and adoption* remind us that we join one another as family in Christ in this world. We are called into a life in the Spirit that finds us groaning alongside one another. In this new way of life, we don't escape our bodies or find that we've crossed over to a spiritual realm where suffering is no more. We are still in a world where people are hungry, where violence flourishes, where weeping is heard from the birthing suite next door. But we are not alone. We are joined with the Spirit of God—the same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead—and we are part of a community oriented toward life.

There are moments during labor and birth when time folds in on itself. The past and the old way of life is surely ending, but the future is not yet here. The pain of the present may be felt with every breath, but it will not last. New life is on the way—we hope, we pray, we trust, relying on the Spirit to lead us.

 **When have you experienced the power of life in the Spirit as part of a community?**

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

On the edge of a new year, we anticipate transformation as we turn the calendar page. Advertisers and social media influencers are sure that a new planner or skin care product can bring a new year and a new you. We may think so, too. Some of us have new year rituals and practices that we like to try. We might make resolutions, choose a word-of-the-year, or start a new fitness routine, all in the hope of a newly focused way of moving through the world. Or we might steadfastly decline to participate, begrudging the pressure to change, or knowing ourselves well enough not to set ourselves up.

Good news! God's Spirit offers new life, and not just at the turning of the year. Like the in-betweenness of the new family

image during labor, this transformation in our lives is somehow both already present and still to come. We tend to forget the immediacy of God's presence when we focus on the spiritual, thinking it must result in some kind of life that is separate from daily work, family, money, laundry, and the prescription refill we keep forgetting. Paul's insistence that God's Spirit leads us in the present and towards God's promised future is both a restful relief and a reminder to pay attention.

As I write these words, I am in a coffee shop next to a mother who just dropped a child off at college for freshman year. The feelings are palpable as she talks with a friend. She is proud and anxious, glad and sad, wistful about the past and hopeful about the future. She's talked about the dorm, food plan, classes, tuition—all details firmly in the here and now and the daily business of living. But she's also mentioned a campus interfaith center that serves meals in the community, and a labyrinth (a circular walking path for prayer and meditation) that she hopes her child will explore. I hear embedded in her words a firm trust that the Spirit is present, a shared prayer that the Spirit's leading will be part of her child's new life, and a hint at how she might join in.

Spiritual practices are ways we literally practice our life in the Spirit. Walking a labyrinth, serving meals, trying new forms of prayer—these help us claim the immediate power of God's presence and point toward a future that is yet to be fully realized. One such practice you might try, hinted at in our text, is intercessory prayer, where we pray with and for one another. It's a bold way to practice the communal life of the Spirit that is ours in Christ Jesus by the grace of God.



Whom can you pray with and for today as a practice of life in the Spirit?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes from the Uniform Series provide additional information about today's Scripture.

1. John 14:16–17 identifies the Spirit by two terms: the “Spirit of truth” and the “Paraclete” (*paraklētos*) or “Advocate.” These correspond to the themes of “witness” and “testimony” that characterize John's Gospel. (See 1:6–7, 19–23; 3:11; 4:39, 15:26–27; see also Mark 13:11 and Matt. 10:20).

2. The Spirit witnesses or testifies to that which has been made known in the mission and ministry of Jesus, which includes proving or convincing the world about sin, righteousness, and judgment.
3. Romans 8 has three sections: verses 1–27, the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer’s life; verses 28–30, the sovereignty of God; and verses 31–39, the reason for assurance in God’s promises. Later, Romans 12 addresses spiritual gifts and the Holy Spirit’s ministry in the church’s service and mission.
4. Flesh/spirit: The flesh (*sarx*) is death, slavery. The Spirit (*pneuma*) gives life, peace, freedom, and adoption as “sons” of God and “heirs” of the covenantal promises. “If . . . you put to death the deeds of the body” (8:13 NRSVue) is translated in NIV as “you put to death the misdeeds of the body,” suggesting that the whole of fleshly existence—while weak, corruptible, and susceptible to the entrapments of sin that focus on fulfilling fleshly desires and appetites—is not without the capability to do some good by God’s Spirit. See also 6:11–14.
5. The adoption of boys was common in ancient Rome. Roman inheritance laws penalized the childless, so people had strong incentives to adopt at least one son. Paul draws upon the Roman law of adoption (8:15–17; see Gal. 4:4–7). In Christ, we have been adopted as God’s very own children and heirs.
6. In ancient Rome, a slave who was adopted could inherit. Paul asserts that a slave to sin and fear becomes a son, by the Spirit of adoption, and thus an heir. The heir, and joint-heir with Christ, inherit the covenantal promises.