

# Be Filled With the Spirit

by John Piper

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*Being filled with the Holy Spirit means having great joy in God, which is the strength that overcomes besetting sin and gives boldness in witness.*

**Duration:** 36:18

**Scripture:** Psalm 42:1

**Topics:** "Holy Spirit", "Christian Living"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of constantly aiming and longing to be bold witnesses for God. He encourages listeners to seek God and rely on His promises to find fulfillment and faith. The speaker warns against turning to alcohol or other mood-altering substances to cope with the challenges of life, as this dishonors God. Instead, he urges listeners to be filled with the Holy Spirit and seek God's will in order to find true happiness and freedom.

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## Transcript

The Apostle Paul commands in Ephesians 5, verse 18, that we be filled with the Holy Spirit. And therefore, I'd like to try to answer two questions this morning. What does it mean to be filled with the Holy Spirit and how can a person be filled with the Spirit? And I think it might help you follow me if I tell you in advance where I'm going.

So I'll start with my conclusions and then give you the biblical support. I think being filled with the Holy Spirit means basically having great joy in God. And since the Bible teaches that the joy of the Lord is your strength, that means that being filled with the Holy Spirit will also imply that we have great power for the overcoming of besetting sin and for boldness in witness.

Basically, though, fullness of the Holy Spirit means radiant joy in God because the Spirit who fills us is the spirit of joy that flows between the Father and the Son because they have so much delight in each other. To be filled with the Holy Spirit is to be caught up into the radiance of the Holy Trinity so that we love and delight in God with the very love and delight that he has in himself, the Father in the Son and the Son in the Father. They come to us, make their abode with us, commune with us so that we love and delight in God with the very love of God.

And in answer to the second question, how do we arrive at such a position? I believe the New Testament answer is by trusting in the God of hope, really believing that God reigns and that not a sparrow falls to the

ground apart from his will and that he rules this world for you and for everybody who trusts him. If you believe that, you will be filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. Now, we live in a day when Pentecostalism has swept the third world in many places and is going great guns in our own country, and therefore I feel an obligation to offer an interpretation not only of the little text, Ephesians 5:18, be filled with the spirit, but also to put this interpretation against the backdrop of the wider New Testament teaching about baptism in the Holy Spirit and fullness with the Holy Spirit.

The phrase baptize in or with the Holy Spirit was apparently coined by John the Baptist. In all of our four gospels, it's reported that he said something to the effect of, I baptize you with water, but he, Jesus, will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. Then two other writers in the New Testament pick up on that and refer to it, namely Luke and Paul.

Luke in the book of Acts and Paul in first Corinthians. Luke refers to this baptism in the Holy Spirit two times. Paul refers to it one time.

Luke in Acts 1:5 and 11:16, and Paul in first Corinthians 12:13. But I do not think they mean the same thing by it. I think they mean two different things.

For Paul, I think baptism in the Holy Spirit is virtually identical with regeneration or being born anew or conversion. We were all dead in trespasses and sins cut off from Christ, he tells us. Then one day in his sovereign grace, the Holy Spirit blows, sweeps over us, gives us new life by uniting us to Christ, the living Lord, and thus to his body.

And that is what Paul means by baptism in the Spirit. It's unrepeatable. It can't happen again.

And Paul and Luke never command that it happen again. Perhaps I should say, though, a word about interpretation here, you I've said this before, you know that in order for the scriptures to be true, it's not necessary that every word or phrase in the scriptures mean the same thing in every place that it occurs. What matters is that when a phrase means something over here and the reality it refers to is made clear that the reality we find through another phrase over here not contradict this reality.

Doesn't matter that they use the same words to describe what's true. What matter is that two things that are claimed to be true don't contradict each other. So I hope it doesn't throw anybody that I say Luke and Paul can use the phrase baptized in the Holy Spirit in two different ways.

Let me read the text where Paul uses it so that it's clear what I just said. It's first Corinthians 12:12 and 13. Just as the body is one and has many members and all the members of the body, though many are one body.

So it is with Christ for then here's the phrase in or with or by a little preposition can be any way you want it by one spirit. We were all baptized into one body. Jews, Greeks, slaves are free.

And we were all made to drink of one spirit. I think according to this text, therefore, that Paul conceived of spirit baptism as that act by which the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ. And that's what it means to become a Christian, to become united to Christ and be part of his body.

That's an unrepeatable event. But now Luke, Luke seems to mean something different by the phrase in acts. Luke wrote acts, you know.

Namely, I think what Luke means by baptism in the spirit is the first experience that a believer has of the fullness of the Holy Spirit. The fullness of the Holy Spirit for Luke is an ongoing and repeated thing. But the baptism in the Holy Spirit isn't.

Now, let me try to show you why I think that in Acts chapter one, verses four and five, Luke reports that Jesus, just before he ascended into heaven, spoke with his disciples about what was to happen on Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And he and he used the words of John the Baptist. He said, you heard from me.

For John baptized with water, but before many days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. That's a clear reference to Pentecost about 10 days later. But when Pentecost comes in chapter two, notice the words that Luke uses to describe what happens in chapter two, verses one following.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place and suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as a fire distributed and resting on each one of them, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the spirit gave them utterance. Jesus promises in chapter one, you're going to be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

And when Luke describes what happened, he says they were filled with the Holy Spirit. Now, if you go over to Acts chapter 11, verses 15 following, we do find out Luke really does believe that this was the baptism of the spirit, even though he calls it a filling with the spirit. What's happening here is Peter is reporting in what happened when he preached at Cornelius among the Gentiles and the spirit fell on them.

And this is the way Peter reports to the church. As I began, this is X 11, 15, as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning, that's Pentecost. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said and then he quotes this John the Baptist phrase again.

These are the only two places where it occurs in Acts. John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit. If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Who was I that I should withstand God? So this later outpouring of the spirit on the Gentiles in Acts 10, 44 is equated with the first Pentecostal outpouring back there in chapter two. And both of them are called here baptism with the Holy Spirit. And therefore, Luke sees what happened at Pentecost, both as a baptism with the spirit and a filling with the spirit.

And that to me was the clue about his meaning of baptism, because if you read the rest of Acts, at least four more times, Luke says the disciples were filled with the spirit. In other words, it can happen again. It's repeated and continued never again.

Does he ever refer to a Christian being baptized by the spirit again? That's once in a Christian life. Therefore, the conclusion I draw about Luke's meaning of baptism with the Holy Spirit is that it seems to be that first experience of filling after a person's believed in the Lord or when he believes in the Lord. And I hope that's clear now.

I don't think Luke equates like Paul does the baptism with the spirit with regeneration. That would mean this and see if you don't think this is really impossible to attribute to Luke's thinking. That would mean that the apostles had been men through the whole of Jesus course of ministry.

They had been. Witnesses to the resurrection, they had had their minds open to understand the scriptures, according to Luke 24, and yet that whole time they were dead in trespasses and sins, cut off from Christ, hostile to God in the flesh. No, I don't think that's what Luke would say to us.

They were not born again at Pentecost. They were born again when they trusted in Christ. Something else happened at Pentecost.

If we asked Luke, is that what you mean, that these men were dead in their trespasses and sins until the day of Pentecost, that the Holy Spirit had not begotten them a new way back there when, by the power of God, Peter confessed Jesus to be the Christ? I think Luke would say, oh, no, no, no. That's not what I mean at all. They've already been born of the spirit.

They've been regenerated, just like all the Old Testament saints, Abraham and David and Elijah, were born of the spirit. But they hadn't yet experienced all that God could do through them by his spirit. That was yet to come.

Now, Christ has come. He has died. He has risen again.

And in that dying and rising, he has purchased for us all the blessings that can be offered so that now, from now on, it's God's people to be filled with the Holy Spirit. It's widespread. It's large.

So when a person first experiences that fullness of the spirit, that's what Luke means by being baptized into or with the Holy Spirit. And that's different from what Paul meant, because Paul used it to refer to conversion and that first ingrafting into Christ. Now, right here, we're at the heart of the charismatic controversy, and I want to try to sort some things out so that at least you know where I stand on some of these issues and why I think the stance is biblical.

One thing is clear so far. If someone asks you, have you been baptized with the spirit? Here's the first thing you should say. Listen carefully.

The first thing you should say is, what do you mean by baptism with the spirit? If you always prefaced your answers with that question, you would avoid 85 percent of your arguments. Probably we get into squabbles and we don't know we're talking different languages. So the first thing you must do is ask a person, what do you mean by baptism in the Holy Spirit? Now, suppose the definition he gives is this, well, by the baptism of the Holy Spirit, I mean that experience that you have with God after conversion in which the Holy Spirit falls on you in such a way that your heart bursts forth in the speaking of tongues, in ecstatic speech, in another language.

Now, if that's what the person means by baptism in the spirit, then some of us are going to answer, yes, I've experienced that and others are going to answer, no, I've never spoken in tongues, so I haven't been baptized with the spirit, according to that definition. But both of us then, those two answers should say to that person, but, you know, that's not a biblical definition of baptism with the spirit. You can define it that way and talk about it that way if you want, but that's not the way either Luke or Paul defines baptism with the Holy Spirit.

There is no way to move from Acts to this day and argue that baptism in the Holy Spirit must necessarily be accompanied with speaking in tongues. That's the mistake of that definition. It makes it a necessary accompaniment, but that cannot be argued successfully from the book of Acts, and we know from 1 Corinthians 12:30 that Paul teaches not everyone is given the gift of tongues.

Some are, some are not, and therefore it cannot be made a necessary part of the definition of baptism in the Holy Spirit. It may or may not result in glossolalia, that is, speaking in tongues, but it's not a necessary part of the definition either of Luke's or of Paul's. But I want to stress here that I am not rejecting the validity of the gift of tongues in our own day.

It is wrong to insist that they are a necessary part of the baptism with the Holy Spirit. It is not wrong to insist. In fact, I must insist that it is a possible part of the baptism of the Holy Spirit as we may experience it today.

When I was in high school, I can remember listening to the old Mr. Dahan, radio Bible class, and I can remember one morning, I was about 14 or 15, standing in my room, this, I don't know why this is so clear to me, standing in the corner of my room, the windows came together like this, the holly tree out there with berries on it, and I was looking out the window, listening to old Mr. Dahan argue that the sign gifts, tongues, healing, miracles, ended with the apostolic age. When the apostles were gone and we had a new testament, then the sign gifts are no longer needed, they're gone. I was 14 and I was looking out the window and I said, Mr. Dahan, those arguments are not valid.

I was just shaking my head. I wrote for the booklet and I read it and underlined it. 15 years old, roughly, somewhere in high school, and they didn't work.

Now, it's 20 years later and I've studied a lot more and I've had lots of friends, not lots, enough friends, who are Pentecostals. And now I say with all the more assurance that we dare not reject any of God's gifts today, including the gifts of tongues. I'm going to talk about the gifts of the spirit next week, so there may be more to come.

But now, back to this person who is asking us, have you been baptized with the spirit? If he uses Paul's definition and means, have you been born anew by the spirit, grafted into the body of Christ, made a part of that fellowship, every Christian should answer unhesitatingly, yes, I have been baptized with the Holy Spirit. And don't let those words stick in your throat. We have been using Paul's definition.

Now, if he uses Luke's definition and means, have you once been so filled with the Holy Spirit that you are full of joy in God and have power to overcome besetting sin and boldness to witness? Then what would your answer be? Every Christian should and could be able to answer, yes, I have experienced that often. But not all Christians can say that Paul taught that there is such a thing as a babe in Christ. And he contrasted a babe in Christ with a spiritual person, a person who's walking by the spirit and filled with the spirit.

Now, if we ask Luke and Paul, what's the problem? What's the need for the babe in Christ? Fundamentally, I think they both would answer what is needed is a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit into that person's life. Paul would call it be filled with the spirit and Luke would agree, be filled with the spirit. But then Luke would say, and if this is the first time you're experiencing that, that's the baptism of the spirit as well.

So the phrase baptized with the spirit is used differently by Luke and by Paul. And we must always distinguish when we get into conversations what we mean by it. But they both agree on the way God works and what our need is.

Now, perhaps one more clarification about Pentecostal teaching. We are sometimes urged to seek a second blessing or a second experience with the Holy Spirit after conversion. Now, there are two things that I think need to be said about that.

One is this. It is possible that this fullness that we are to seek happened the first time at conversion so that there is no second experience per se to seek after. Nothing is left to seek except the preservation or the repetition or the growth of that first experience.

That's the first thing. The second thing is even if we don't experience that fullness with the Holy Spirit at the point of conversion, get a real slow start with God. It would probably be a mistake to conceive of what we should now do as seeking the second experience, as if that would be the end of our spiritual quest for fullness.

I think what we should seek if we're in that category, and this applies to all Christians as well, we should seek and hunger and long that God pour out his spirit upon us and fill us with joy, with victory over sin and with power for bold witness. Now, the ways that God brings a person to that point are as varied as there are people, and we ought not stereotype any one experience. I can just think of four from people I've known and in myself.

It may come this first fullness where you have joy and power and boldness. It may come through a sweeping, tumultuous experience of ecstasy in which you speak in tongues. It may come in a sweeping, tumultuous experience of ecstasy in which you do not speak in tongues.

It may come through a crisis in your life when your health goes and you realize you've been depending a lot on yourself and you abandon yourself wholly to God and say, I'm yours from now on. And a new sweet assurance comes into your heart. And it's almost like being born anew all over again.

And we get all mixed up in our language when we talk like that. But many of you have experienced it that way. Or it may come gradually through a steady diet of word, fellowship, worship, service, until one day down the road a little ways you look back and you say, boy, am I different than I was two or three years ago.

The Holy Spirit is reigning like he never has been before. These have been great months. And you can't point to any one time when it came over you like a big breaker.

So let us not prejudge one another's experience. Let us all seek and yearn for the fullness of the spirit. What happens then when we experience that first fullness wherever we think we've gotten there? What we should do from then on is what rest on our laurels, not Paul.

He pressed on. Rather, seek for all the fullness of God to stay filled and be greater in our fullness. Now, that brings us to Ephesians 5:18, because the tense of the verb in Ephesians 5:18 means keep on being filled with the spirit, stay filled with the spirit.

Let's look at this context so we can see more specifically what it means and how to get it. Ephesians chapter five, verses 15 to 18 is the context that we'll look at. Look carefully how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise, redeeming the time because the days are evil, therefore.

Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is and do not get drunk with wine, for that's debauchery, but be filled with the spirit, addressing one another in Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,

singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord always and for everything, giving thanks in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father. Now, I think the key here is the contrast with drunkenness. If you stop and think about that, a lot of light is shed on what it means to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

What do people go to alcohol for? They go to alcohol for a happy hour, right? A happy hour. We all want to be happy, but there's a problem. The days are evil.

Look at the logic of verses 16 to 18. The days are evil, therefore. And then I think he draws a couple of inferences.

Don't be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is and don't get drunk. Be filled with the spirit. Where do you go when the days are evil? Where do so many people go when the days are evil, when you're frightened, when you're discouraged or depressed or anxious? Paul pleads and I plead.

Don't go to alcohol. Turn to the spirit. Anything of value, anything of value that alcohol can give you, the spirit of God can give you more and better.

And I'll come back to that in a minute. There are people, you know, who can't even whistle a happy tune or sing a song of gladness at their work or on their lunch hour because they're so anxious. They're so tense.

The burdens of life are so great. Singing is the last thing they can do. But later on in the evening at the tavern, after a few drinks are under their belts, they can put their arms around each other and sing and be happy, carefree.

And we all want to be happy and carefree and uninhibited. And isn't it the mounting tragedy of our own day, just like it was in Paul's, that increasing numbers of people, even Christians, think that the only way that they can find childlike, happy, carefree freedom is by drugging themselves, whether by alcohol or other mood altering drugs. That kind of behavior dishonors our God, and therefore, Paul says there's a better way to cope with the evil days.

There's a better way to cope. Be filled with the spirit, stay filled with the spirit, and you will know an unmatched joy that overflows in songs like the little child who's just running around the house making up songs. Can't keep him down like Benjamin.

The fundamental meaning of being filled with the spirit is to be filled with joy that comes from God and just overflows in singing. Now, Luke would agree with this, I think, because he said in Acts 13, 52, the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. The two go together.

Now, of course, I've said two other things belong to the Holy Spirit's fullness, namely strength to overcome sin and to witness boldly, unashamedly. Well, that follows as the night, the day. If you're happy in God, the joy of the Lord shall be your strength.

When you're happy in God, you don't have any trouble witnessing. You're not very allured away to do things that displease the Lord who's making you so happy that would be like a pie in his face. The key is to be happy in God.

So I repeat, whatever joy or peace you find in alcohol, you can find more in the Holy Spirit. And that, you know, it's funny that we here on this side of Pentecost should have trouble grasping that because the psalmist already experienced it. Listen to what the psalmist says in Psalm four, seven and eight.

Notice the words joy and peace here and wine. You, O Lord, have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound. I in peace, I will lie down and sleep for you, O Lord, make me dwell in safety, peace and joy vastly more when the nations around had all the wine and all the grain that they could want.

Now, that Psalm leads us to our final question about how how can we obey this command? If I'm not mistaken, all of you want it. If you don't, that's the worst problem of all. What I look for in people is not first the fullness of the spirit, but hunger, hunger for it.

That's what I want to see. And I can go a long way with a person like that. It's the person who's got no desire.

That's the hardest person to work with. How then, what can we do? We're in the same predicament that we were last week. We're told to be filled.

We're going to be acted upon. We're not the filler, the Holy Spirit is the filler. So we're confronted with this peculiar command of being filled.

What can we do when we're passive, being acted upon, being filled? The answer must be something like what can we do to put ourselves in a position so that the Holy Spirit will do this to us or something like that? Now, I think the answer to the question that the New Testament gives is this. God has ordained to move into our lives with fullness through faith. The pathway that the Holy Spirit cuts through the jungle of our anxieties into the clearing of joy is the pathway of trust, faith.

This is what Luke says in Acts six, five. Stephen, that's my middle name. I'm glad it is.

My dad made a great choice. Oh, I want to be like Steve. He said this is a chapter six where he was chosen.

Why was he chosen? He was a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. Now, that phrase is not an accident for Luke because he says the same thing about Barnabas in chapter 11, verse 24. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith.

Those two go right together. Now, let's look at how Paul does this. The most important text in the writings of Paul for how to be filled with the spirit is Romans 15, verse 13.

And this is what he says. May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing. There's the how to in believing that by the power of the Holy Spirit, you might abound in hope.

Now there are two halves to the verse and we have to see him coming together in the first half. He says the way to get full of joy and peace is in believing. So through faith, we move into joy and peace.

Then in the second half of the verse, he says the way to abound in hope is through the power of the Holy Spirit. Now, we put those two things together. We got hope, joy, peace.

We got faith and we got the Holy Spirit. If we put them together, the synthesis that we see is the way to come to experience hope is through trusting. And that is the Holy Spirit's power.

The Holy Spirit enables us to trust in God that opens up hope for the future. And what comes from hope? Joy, peace. You don't have anything to worry about.

So the way to be filled with joy, peace, hope, the Holy Spirit is to trust in the God of hope, to rivet, to rivet our faith onto the things God has done and said that make our future bright, that give us hope. Now, nobody, nobody is always full of the Holy Spirit in this sense, I don't think nobody is always joyful as they could be. Nobody is always empowered for victory over sin as much as they could be, and nobody is always fully bold in witness.

But it ought to always be our aim and our longing, constant aim and longing as a heart pants after the flowing streams. So my soul pants for thee, O God, my soul thirsts for God, for the living God. But now the way to slake that hunger is to preach a sermon to your soul, a sermon of faith.

So why are you downcast? Why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, I will again praise him because he is my help. There's the promise. He is my God, the sum of all the promises we've got to set before our soul every day, a banquet of promises and then feed on that banquet of promises until we are full of faith, which will result in fullness of joy and peace.

And then people might look at us and say, like Luke did to Barnabas, there's a good person full of faith and the Holy Spirit.

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