



# Soar: the Power of the Holy Spirit

*Peter Middleton*

## Introduction

These are strange and unfamiliar times. Unprecedented. Uncharted. I write this from the confines of my home whilst outside the springtime sunshine continues to beam glorious rays upon the tulips and budding magnolia. The joyous melodies of birdsong seem oblivious to Boris's daily broadcasts, dissonant to the prevailing mood of anxiety and uncertainty.

Spring: the season of new life. Spring: the season of new beginnings.

And yet, and yet...

\*\*\*

When I was asked to speak as part of the Lent series of talks, I must admit that I felt a little uncertain about the prospect. Glancing through the list of names of those who were due to speak as part of the series, I realised that I was the only one who wasn't an ordained minister (one of whom was the Bishop of Shrewsbury, no less!) and amongst this list of eminent individuals, I felt distinctly underqualified, questioning why I, a mere teacher, had been asked to contribute. Who was I to speak to you? What could I possibly say?

I was given the task of speaking on the Holy Spirit (well, that's an easy one then, isn't it?!), following on from talks on God the Father and God the Son. Who was I to speak to you? What could I possibly say?

And then Coronavirus happened. Restrictions were put in place. Public gatherings banned. Churches no longer able to meet. Lent Talks cancelled. I had been let off the hook!

Well, not exactly.

1

Whilst Covid-19 might have got in the way of my scheduled talk at St. Alkmund's Church, the Lord placed on my heart a desire to 'speak' at this time, albeit not in person but in written form. And so I write this to you— some of whom I know, others of whom I've never met— in the hope that what the Lord has placed on my heart will speak at this time to you, too.

So what can I possibly say to you?

As I say, I am not an ordained minister or theologian, nor can I claim to be an expert on the Holy Spirit (far from it), but what I hope to do is speak with at least a degree of conviction on three areas:

1. The Power of the Holy Spirit
2. The Poetry of the Holy Spirit
3. The Personal Experience of the Holy Spirit

I may not be a theologian nor an expert on the Holy Spirit, but the Word of the Lord is revealed to us in moments of contemplation and meditation, so I hope to explore, first of all, the Holy Spirit as presented to us in the Word of God. Secondly, as an English teacher, I hope you'll forgive me for gravitating towards poetry, in particular the work of an old favourite of mine: the Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. Finally, if you'll indulge me, I hope to cast back to personal experience, delving into my own journey in faith and, in particular, a moment in my life as a young adult that has shaped me and daily reminds me of the God who loves us and the power of the Holy Spirit.

2

## Part One: The Power of the Holy Spirit

Where better to begin than the beginning? The triune God, after all, is revealed from the very outset of the Bible in its opening verses:

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.*

Genesis 1: 1-2

I have found myself thinking a great deal about *flight* over these past weeks, and this is a thread that will run through what I intend to explore over these coming pages. For whilst the Holy Spirit is less well represented in the iconography of Christianity and, indeed, less of a visible presence within our churches and art galleries—awash as they are with emblems of God the Father and God the Son—perhaps the most prevailing imagery we are presented with for the Holy Spirit is that of a bird, here seen “hovering” over the waters. It is a thrilling image, isn’t it? Wings effortlessly outspread, this bird-like being hovers expectantly, inches above the newly-formed, softly-lapping waters of the earth. It suggests (at least to me) a fleeting moment of anticipation before being sent forth to fly, sent forth to soar.

I can’t lay claim to knowing a great deal about birds (let’s add that to the list of inexpertise, shall we?!), but some brief research into ornithological motion (ok, I confess, I typed into Google ‘How do birds hover in the air?’) reveals that some birds, such as kestrels, remain motionless - ‘*wind hovering*’ - above a point on the ground by flying into the wind at a speed equal to that of the wind.

It is a seeming contradiction, then, of *movement* and *stasis*, power and peace. In these times of uncertainty, I find that a calming and reassuring image.

Hopkins takes up the image in his poem ‘The Windhover’ (more on this in Part Two), wondering at the magnificent “brute beauty” of the hovering bird with its wings outstretched. For the hovering of the Spirit at the moment of creation is a moment both of beauty and of power. It is, likewise, a moment of equilibrium, with the Spirit (the hovering bird) enabled by the power of the creator God (the wind it flies into).

It is a moment later echoed early in John’s gospel where Christ the Messiah is described:

*Then John gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him except that the one who sent me to baptise with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptise with the Holy Spirit.’ I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.”*

John 1: 32-34

Here again we see a moment of Spirit ‘hovering’, this time a dove - so often a symbol of peace—reminding us that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one. The Spirit lives in Christ, and therefore as we live lives committed to Christ, so the Spirit lives in us. Michael Reeves puts it like this in *The Good God* (a good book, by the way!):

The [Spirit’s] real work is to bring us to, and keep us in, the sunshine of God’s love. It is there that we will sing heartily; it is there, abiding in Christ, that we will bear fruit. The Spirit

shares the triune life of God by bringing God's children into the mutual delight of the Father and the Son— and there we become like our God: fruitful and life-giving.

So, in the same way that in being baptised, the light of the Spirit descended upon Christ, so too does the Spirit descend upon us as Christians. And in so doing, we are united to Christ and are able to live as he does, love as he does.

As Christians— spread through this town, spread through this nation, spread through this world— we are enabled by the Holy Spirit living within us. And let's not think for one minute that we are alone. When Christ prayed at his moment of greatest isolation, he prayed for all believers this prayer:

I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

John 17: 20-23

We are living in the midst of a time of (quite literal) isolation. Some of you will be reading this alone. Unable to see family. Unable to see friends. Whilst technology now allows us to be in touch with others all around the world and do so like never before, many will be feeling deeply lonely at this time, desperately alone.

Christ's prayer for believers, then, provides us with an uplifting message at this time. Through the Holy Spirit we are given the glory, we are one, as Christ is one with the Father. Perhaps more so than ever at this time of global lockdown, the 'complete unity' that Christ speaks of reminds us we are far from alone. We are one with the Lord, and therefore one with each other. As believers we are anointed by the Spirit— in the same way Christ was himself anointed at his baptism— and filled with it, much like Aaron was anointed with oil when ordained as high priest:

How good and pleasant it is  
when God's people live together in unity!  
It is like precious oil poured on the head,  
running down on the beard,  
running down on Aaron's beard,  
down on the collar of his robe

Psalm 133: 1-2

As that anointing oil flowed from Aaron's forehead down his face and on to his robes, so too does the Spirit flow down from Christ (our 'Head') to his body (the Church), anointing us.

Spirit *flows*, then, and as we'll see in the next section, Spirit *flies*.

## Part Two: The Poetry of the Holy Spirit

A near contemporary of Shrewsbury's very own Charles Darwin, the Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins was a largely unheralded writer during his lifetime. A Jesuit priest, his poetry was in many senses an act of prayer, a creative expression of his devotion to God. His style of writing was revolutionary for its time with his distinctive coinage, 'sprung rhythm' and what he termed 'inshape'. Reading it is a memorable experience.

I turn to poetry now for two reasons. Firstly, Hopkins's poetry— in particular— perhaps helps us to understand the experience of the Holy Spirit, with two poems that specifically aid us (well, me at least!) in exploring the work of the Spirit. Secondly, the Holy Spirit is in himself, to my mind, *poetic*. What I mean by that is to say that there is a beauty and lyricism to the workings of the Spirit; that, like poetry, the Spirit can be *felt* and *experienced* if not always visibly seen.

I have chosen two poems for you to read that perhaps best explain that encounter with the Holy Spirit: 'The Windhover' and 'God's Grandeur'. Both were written in 1877 just three months apart, both taking as their theme the power and beauty of the triune God and the personal experience of faith.

All poetry is best experienced read aloud, and this is particularly true for these poems. Hopkins himself said that "till it is spoken it is not performed; it does not perform, it is not itself." Have a read, then— aloud if you're brave enough— of the first poem 'The Windhover' set out on the opposite page.

### *The Windhover* to Christ our Lord

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-  
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his  
riding  
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding  
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing  
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,  
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bed: the hurl and  
gliding  
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding  
Stirred for a bird, - the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here  
Buckle! And the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion  
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: sheer plod makes plough down sillion  
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,  
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

As is typical of much of Hopkins's poetry, 'The Windhover' takes as its subject matter the Book of Nature, seeing the creator God in the majesty of the natural world, in this case a kestrel in flight. It is a poem that seeks to capture a specific moment ("I caught this morning...") but likewise portrays a triune God that transcends time.

The kestrel (or *windhover*) is most often read as a metaphor for Christ. After all, the poem is dedicated to *Christ our Lord* and the first description we are presented with is the bird as "kingdom of daylight's *dauphin*" (my italics). This, of course, is a Jesuit priest "stirred" by the intensity of faith and his devotion to Christ his "chevalier". It is no coincidence that he takes as his form the sonnet, a poetic structure most commonly associated with love.

The poem certainly works at that dual level, providing those of a secular persuasion with a vivid and evocative portrayal of a kestrel in flight, whilst simultaneously acting as a kind of poem-prayer for those of faith.

Yet I think the poem delves even deeper into faith than is commonly supposed, for here in the poem is not just Christ the Chevalier, but likewise God the Father and God the Holy Spirit.

Let's turn again to the opening lines of the poem:

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-  
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his  
riding

The poet's encounter with the windhover is at first light, the shafts of morning light like an artist's brushstroke on the bird ("dapple-dawn-drawn"). The allusion to *light* is important (not least its neat poetic rhyme with *flight*) for it is here that we first see the Holy Spirit. The triune God has already been invoked through the three *m*'s of "morning morning's minion", the effect repeated in the following line with the triplets of *d*'s in "dom of daylight's dauphin" and "dapple-dawn-drawn".

But it is the light that strikes us most, reveals to us the Holy Spirit as Spirit reveals himself to us.

Let us recall, for a moment, the baptism of Christ as described in Matthew 3:16:

"And Jesus, when he was baptised, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him."

This itself recalls the earliest moment of creation where God said, "Let there be light" so in Christ— and Spirit— we now have that light for ourselves to illuminate and guide (or as the King James Version puts it in John 1:9, "That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world").

God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, therefore, are intertwined, the light of first creation now embodied in Christ, now gifted to us in Holy Spirit. This, I think, is what Hopkins means when he describes "the fire that breaks from thee". Perhaps he had in mind the verses from Malachi 4: 1-2 which promises the healing of a new light,

the “sun of righteousness”:

‘Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,’ says the Lord Almighty. ‘Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings.’

Hopkins’s poem, likewise, seems to be a call to action for a nation of unbelievers, where capitalist greed had taken over and the beauty of creation had been suffocated by the smog and fog of the Industrial Revolution. The final lines contrast starkly the darkness of “plod” and “blue-bleak embers” with the “gold-vermilion” life-giving light of Spirit. When we encounter the Holy Spirit it is to experience for ourselves this life-giving light. And what a gift it is.

\*\*\*

The second poem I’ve chosen is ‘God’s Grandeur’ which is set out on the opposite page for you to read. It’s another sonnet which might seem strange for a poem that mostly seems bleak in tone (the swift masterful movement of bird now replaced with the harsh verbs of industrialisation: “seared”; “bleared”; “smeared”). Yet it is a poem that reveals Holy Spirit as all-conquering and all-loving. Have a read for yourself...

### *God’s Grandeur*

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And, for all this, nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

And though the last lights off the black West went

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastwards, springs-

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

The poem 'God's Grandeur' gives the reader a clearer sense of Hopkins's frustration (even anger) at the way in which people had turned away from God. The word "charged" in the opening line has both connotations of electricity and light (and therefore suggests God's power) but likewise suggests an accusation. It's a somewhat bleak opening stanza where Hopkins seems despondent at the faithlessness of the nation ("Why do men then now not reckon his rod?"). The alliterative triplets we saw in 'The Windhover' have now been replaced by the more wearisome "have trod, have trod, have trod".

Industrialisation and capitalism has "seared with trade" the beauty of the world, and consumed man's desires. The "stubble" that is referred to in Malachi is again seen in the barrenness that Hopkins describes: "the soil is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod".

Yet hope prevails in the poem, light bursts through the blackness. As was the case in 'The Windhover', the Holy Spirit is revealed at the moment of dawn, a light that "springs" (suggesting both a sudden movement and a seasonal suggestion of new life) and floods the world with an illumination that conquers the darkness.

Charles Spurgeon once wrote that "It is ever the Holy Spirit's work to turn our eyes away from self to Jesus." And that, I think, was Hopkins's prayer, too. So consumed by the desires of self, this was a nation that had turned its back on faith. Yet, the Holy Spirit, bird-like again, "over the bent/World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings". Protecting and warming the nest of earth, the Holy Spirit promises a new life, the potential for a whole nation of believers to 'hatch', be nourished, and in turn fly with bright wings themselves. And not just fly, but soar.

So I come back to where I began, with reference to spring light and birdsong. These may be times of darkness and uncertainty, but that does not stop the sun coming up each morning, that does not stop the birdsong. In the same way, so too does the *light* and *flight* of Holy Spirit prevail and enable us at these times. After all, it is at times of greatest darkness that light illuminates most piercingly.





### Part Three: The Personal Experience of the Holy Spirit

I am a runner. With apologies to those of you who cannot think of anything worse than spending your free time pounding tarmac, this next section is a story about running. My story as a runner.

Since my first marathon (London, 2002), I've run— at last count— 17 marathons and 6 ultra-marathons. I've lost count of the number of half-marathons, 10kms, Parkruns and cross-country runs. They probably number in their hundreds. Needless to say it's more than just a hobby!

The big question is *why*? And well you might ask.

\*\*\*

The image opposite is taken from the last race I competed in: the Shrewsbury 10km at the start of March. I'm getting on a bit these days as I approach 40, so I was pleased to run a Personal Best (there's life in the old dog yet!) and perhaps even more pleased that a race photographer had finally managed to capture me in motion with both feet off the ground. In full flight, as it were.

My journey to that point hasn't been easy, though. What follows is my own story of darkness and light, and my encounters with an enabling God.

\*\*\*

Back in 2003 and newly graduated, I travelled to South Africa to live in the beautiful region of Kwa-Zulu Natal, teaching in a small school nestled in the evocatively-named Valley of a Thousand Hills. I had run the London Marathon by that point, but having vowed upon crossing the finishing line to never run a marathon again (famous last words...) I had no intention of running whilst staying in South Africa.

However, at some point one of my colleagues discovered that I had run a marathon, and somehow I was convinced to come along with him to the local running club. Before long, I had become a fully-fledged member of that running club and, what's more, I had been convinced not only to run a marathon (which I did in the March of that year) but to also run the most fabled of all South African races: the Comrades Marathon.

Run in June every year, just under 20,000 runners line up to tackle what is in fact not a marathon (26 miles) but a double marathon of 55 miles from the city of Pietermaritzburg to Durban.

5.30am. Darkness. The start line of the race outside City Hall in Pietermaritzburg. Pitch black. I can still today vividly recall that start line, the feeling of uncertainty standing amidst the throng of thousands of other runners, all shivering in the pre-dawn cold, unsure what the next 55 miles might hold.

As we shuffled from side to side to keep warm and awaited the starter's gun, I heard from the back of the pack what sounded at first like a whispering, gathering steam train: *Sho...Sho...Sho...* It got louder and louder, until the sibilant wave had spread through the entire field of competitors. And then, almost abruptly, it stopped. A pause, and then a lone voice sang out, *Sho Sholoza!* Another pause, then thousands of voices in unison responded, *Sho Sholoza* (Go Forward, Go Forward). *Kulezo ntaba Stimela Sipum'e South Africa* (Go forward on this train from these mountains of South Africa).

It was hairs on the back of your neck stuff, the African folk song passing through 20,000 runners urging us on. Go forward, go forward.

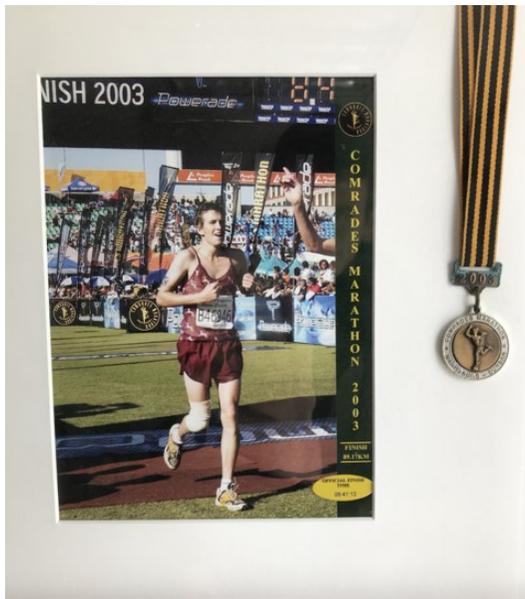
Traditionally sung by Zimbabwean Ndebele migrant workers who were working in the South African diamond mines, it is a song that describes the



return journey back to their homeland of Zimbabwe. Coming out of the darkness and depths of the mineshaft and into the light of day, and journeying home. Out of the darkness and into the light.

It was a mesmerising experience and, as we all set off on our own journey into the light of dawn, the words of the Ndebele folk song still echoed and reverberated in the cold mist of the morning. And as we ran, many nations, many tribes, many ages, man and woman, we were all journeying out of the darkness and into the light. A light that finally broke over the farmlands of Camperdown and Cato Ridge as the mist lifted and the sun shone down on the acacia trees and the dusty plains to each side of the road. Go forward, go forward.

Somehow, somehow, I made it home. 8 hours 41 minutes and 13 seconds later (and let me tell you those 13 seconds were tough!). But it was an utterly, utterly exhilarating experience.



So, when the following year, back in the UK, I got a phone call from South Africa saying, 'Are you coming back? Running again?' I didn't hesitate. That year it would be what's known as the 'Up Run', the reverse of what I had run previously, this time starting at sea level in Durban and climbing up to the highest point of Umlaas Road—810m above sea level— before finishing in the cricket ground stadium at Pietermaritzburg.

The same rousing chorus of *Sho Sholoza* set the race off. The same route challenged us. The same medal awaited. I finished in just under 9 hours again; again, an utterly, utterly exhilarating experience.

But it was a race that just about killed me.



Just 48 hours after crossing the finishing line I ended up in hospital, severely dehydrated and with kidney failure. It sounds worse than it was; in reality it should have been a straightforward process to get me back on my feet. And it all looked to have gone to plan; a few days later, I was discharged.



However, unbeknown to us, an error in the rehydration process had inadvertently led to the far more dangerous scenario of *hyperhydration*, where my body was flooded with excess fluid. With nowhere else to go, the fluid flooded first my heart and then my brain, causing my body to shut down. They blue-lighted it immediately. I seizure three times: once in the

Medical centre; once in ICU; and once in the CT scanner at the hospital as doctors sought to look at the damage down to my brain.

Whilst I wasn't aware of any of this at the time, I know now that it was the darkest moment of my mother's life, who had travelled over with me to watch the race. She was told to ring my father back in the UK, and tell him to come out to South Africa. Your son might not make it, they told her.

\*\*\*

*He might not make it, they said, and I might not have. He's going to have lasting damage, they said, to his brain, to his heart, to his speech, to his movement. And I might have. And I probably should have.*

But, miraculously, I made it out. I made it out of that black, cavernous mineshaft and back into the light. A week after being admitted into intensive care I emerged into the light of day. The South African doctors couldn't understand it; they struggled to understand how the fluid on my brain hadn't caused lasting damage and how I could be walking again, talking again, so soon after coming so close to death. But I knew why.



Throughout it all, I had palpably and powerfully sensed my God sustaining me, a presence hovering over me as I lay in my moment of greatest need. Many were praying for me, some by my bedside, many more— in their hundreds— around the world. And there was a power to that: I am living proof if ever there was needed any.

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

*1 Peter 2: 9*

As I lay on that hospital bed, I sensed the power of the Holy Spirit working in my life, bringing me closer to Christ, and restoring me. For me, the Holy Spirit therefore means both *light* and *flight*: a light that conquers darkness, and a means by which we can be lifted and elevated, to soar above the troubles of the world.

I thank God every day for giving me new life; not just life on this earth but the promise, too, of eternal life. So, whilst I find it hard revisiting that time of darkness and opening up old wounds, I do so in order that I can declare the praises of the Lord.

So why do I run? I do so firstly because I can (and there was a time where, even after recovering and being released from hospital that seemed to be in doubt) but I do so, likewise, in thanksgiving. I do so in order that through my story others may hear of the power of the Holy Spirit and a loving God.

The Holy Spirit shines brightly. The Holy Spirit soars.

## **Postscript**

I want to leave you with these verses from Isaiah, and pray that they may be words of encouragement and comfort to you at this time. There seems much to be fearful of at the moment with an unseen— but alarmingly impactful— virus spreading its infection around the world. Let us not forget, though, that the Holy Spirit - with bright wings spread— broods over the earth. Our Lord, who created us, who formed us, broods over the earth. We have nothing to be afraid of.

*But now, thus says the Lord,  
he who created you, O Jacob,  
he who formed you, O Israel:*

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;*

*I have called you by name, you are mine.*

*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;*

*when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you.*

*For I am the Lord your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour*

Isaiah 43.1-3