

## **Experiencing God's Presence**

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**Rich Nathan**

**July 20, 2025**

**People of His Presence**

**Acts 2:1-4**

Many of you know that I was raised in a Jewish family in New York City. I never set foot in a church building until I was 18 for any reason at all. I never went to a Christmas service, an Easter service; I never entered a church for a wedding or a funeral. I was completely unaware of anything to do with Christianity.

And as many of you also know, it was through the woman who later became my wife, Marlene, that I first heard about Christianity. We met in college at Case Western Reserve in Cleveland and she introduced me to Jesus. Now, when Marlene and I met, she often talked with me about Jesus, and I had an opportunity to observe her on campus where I saw this teenaged girl act like a Christian. It wasn't just Marlene's words but the way that she related to other people that I thought, "There's something different about her." She was kinder than the rest of my friends. She was more loving. She was more honest. She was more humble. She had all of these wonderful qualities that made me think maybe there was something else going with her besides just being a nice person.

But my real stumbling block in becoming a Christian was that I was an atheist. I simply didn't believe in God and found it almost impossible to wrap my mind around the idea that there was someone out there beyond my brain. Marlene talked with me about reasons that she believed in God. I saw an attractive life.

There was something about her that was really intriguing. But I just couldn't get past this stumbling block of my unbelief. All her arguments didn't move me to faith in God.

But Marlene was very faithful to pray for me. In fact, I think she prayed for me every day during our freshman year of college. And one day sometime in early spring, I was in my dorm room alone and all of a sudden, without seeking it or pursuing it or working myself up or anything that I did, I suddenly experienced the presence of God. I can't explain it. I was by myself. I wasn't on drugs or worked up emotionally. But suddenly, I felt a presence come into the room that I knew was God. In a moment, I moved from atheism to theism. I knew there was a personal God. This experience lasted, I think, for a number of minutes. But in any case, I went around for the next two weeks telling friends, "You know, there really is a God. I've met him. I've experienced him." And from there it was a very short step to believing in Jesus.

An experience of God has been a regular part of my Christian life. Yes, Christianity contains a set of doctrines. It calls us to believe something. Yes, Christianity contains a set of ethics. Yes, Christianity involves us working for justice and caring about the marginalized. But there has been a thread over the last five decades in my life that simply has involved an experience of God.

Fast forward 10 years. The church that we were a part of that was a predecessor to Vineyard Columbus held a men's conference. We were a very small church at the time. Our church was part of a little group of churches – there were seven small churches like ours – and all the men gathered for a meeting. Well, there was a man up front from a Vineyard church in California. I had not ever heard of the Vineyard movement, but this man was teaching about the Holy Spirit. At one point in the meeting, he said, "I'm going to just invite the Holy Spirit to come." I thought, "Well, I thought the Holy Spirit was already here. Isn't the Holy Spirit everywhere present?" He simply said, "Come, Holy Spirit!" All of a sudden in the room, all heaven broke loose in the room. Men began to shake violently, and some men fell down and other men began to scream. It was all very unsettling. I watched – I wasn't comfortable with what I was seeing, but suddenly, I again felt the presence of God. I had a dramatic experience and I felt God pressing down on my life as his presence came. I've had many experiences like that over the last five decades.

I know that some of you have had similar experiences of God's presence. But I also know that for some of you, all of this all sounds really odd. Maybe you've never experienced the presence of God. But listen, I'm being very deliberate today when I use the term "experience." Because throughout the New Testament the Holy Spirit is not simply presented to us as a doctrine at the end of a creed, "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy universal church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting."

It is surely the case that there is doctrinal content to Christianity. But there's something more to Christianity than doctrinal content. There is not only something to believe in order to be a Christian. There is also someone to receive, someone to experience. Again, the church has always had creeds – the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Chalcedonian Creed. Christianity does have a truth content to it. We can't just believe anything. There's content to our Christian faith. Nevertheless, Christianity goes way beyond creeds, and beyond propositional content. New Testament Christianity also involves an encounter with the Holy Spirit.

Now I know that much of the church today says not to worry about experiences, to not worry about feelings – to concern yourselves only with the truth, and that is enough. On one hand that is partially right. You don't have to wait for a feeling to surrender your life to Jesus. Jesus really died for your sins. Jesus really rose from the dead. Jesus really is the Lord and Master of the universe. He really wants you to surrender your life to him and become one of his followers. You don't have to wait for a feeling to say, "I need you Jesus. I want you to save me and become the Lord of my life," and you don't have to wait for a feeling to obey God - to do what is right and loving and kind. You don't have to say, "Well, I don't know if God wants me to lie or not. I'll just wait for a feeling to decide whether or not God wants me to lie." Of course, that would be nonsense! We

don't have to wait around for a feeling to do God's will as it's revealed to us in the Bible.

But, if you never experience God's presence in your life, there really is something sub-Christian about that. The Christian life is not based on feelings. But feelings and experiences absolutely accompany the normal Christian life. If you never experience the Holy Spirit's presence, if you never feel Almighty God drawing near to you in a personal, intimate way, you're not living New Testament Christianity. God not only wants you to believe in him, he also wants you to experience him and to feel his presence.

I've often used this illustration regarding my relationship with my wife, Marlene. It's appropriate for me to hug and kiss my wife whether I feel like it in the moment or not. But if while we were kissing, I never felt anything, if while I hug my wife Marlene I said to her, "Marlene, as I look into your beautiful blue eyes, the only thing I'm aware of is a deadness inside of me. I have absolutely no feelings while we kiss. Right now, the only thing I feel is a cool indifference. I am logically, reasonably, and intellectually in love with you, but my emotions are absolutely cold and dead. I base my kiss on the truth that you are my wife." Would you not all say that there's something terribly wrong with me and with my relationship with my wife? And the same thing, friend, I think is true if you say regarding your relationship with God. If you never feel anything, there's something deficient.

Today, we're going to look at one of the key moments in Christian history, the Day of Pentecost. We're going to discover that when the Holy Spirit comes, the disciples have an experience. It was a communal experience, a sudden experience, a felt experience, a powerful experience, and a missional experience. I called today's message "Experiencing God's Presence." Let's pray.

**[SLIDE #1]** When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. [Acts 2:1-4, NIV]

Now the writer Luke tells us in verse one,

**[SLIDE #2]** When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. [Acts 2:1, NIV]

Pentecost was one of three pilgrim festivals in which Jewish men were required to go up to Jerusalem. The three pilgrim festivals in Judaism were Passover,

which celebrated the Exodus, God's deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery. Then there's the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles that Jews call Sukkot. The Feast of Booths celebrated the temporary shelters that the Israelites used in their wilderness wanderings through the desert on their way to the Promised Land. And finally, there is the Feast of Weeks, what Christians call Pentecost, that takes place seven weeks after Passover. Pentecost has to do with 50 days. We count off seven weeks from the Sunday following Passover and we get to Pentecost.

Pentecost, or the Feast of Weeks, is not nearly so well known by Jewish people as Passover or the Feast of Tabernacles. It was a covenant renewal festival in Jewish tradition. Pentecost was supposedly the day in Jewish tradition that the law was given at Mount Sinai and it was also a harvest festival in which the first fruits of the wheat harvest are brought to the Lord. But it's the least well-known of the three Jewish pilgrim festivals.

But I want you to notice something. In verse 1, we read

**[SLIDE #3]** When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. [Acts 2:1, NIV]

**[SLIDE #4]** Experiencing the Holy Spirit is a communal experience.

This experience is not just given to a spiritual elite. Involved in this experience of Pentecost was not only just the 11 apostles, 12 minus Judas, but probably the 120 who were there in the upper room, folks who had gathered for prayer. These were ordinary men and women who accompanied the apostles. It was a thoroughly democratic experience, very different than the gift of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, we see the Holy Spirit come upon kings to anoint them for their kingly office. The Holy Spirit came upon prophets to empower them to speak. The Holy Spirit came upon leaders for the sake of delivering Israel from an oppressor. But as a general rule, the Spirit was not given to ordinary followers of God. However, what we have here in Acts is that all of the believers experienced the Spirit, not just the pastors and those who knew a great deal of Bible. It wasn't just for people who attended seminary. Here's what we read in Acts 2:39:

**[SLIDE #5] The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call. [Acts 2:39, NIV]**

The gift of the Spirit is for you. It is for your children. It is for those who are currently far away from God. And I think the idea of them being all together in one place when the Spirit came suggests that there's a kind of unity that the Spirit produces. The emphasis here is not just that they were together in one geographic location, but that they were all together in a common accord, that



they were all together in a common love. They were all together in a common mission and common commitment to Christ. Wherever the Holy Spirit is at work, the Spirit will produce unity.

And here's the second thing.

**[SLIDE #6]** Experiencing the Holy Spirit is a sudden experience.

Look at verse 2.

**[SLIDE #7]** Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. [Acts 2:2, NIV]

The Holy Spirit comes like a violent wind blowing from heaven. And what's being emphasized is that the Holy Spirit is not subject to human control. This experience happened suddenly, unexpectedly, like a gust of wind blowing. These people were just sitting there praying and then the Spirit of God blew in. I was just in my dorm room and suddenly, the Lord came. We were at a Vineyard meeting and the man said, "Come Holy Spirit," and suddenly, the wind blew - unanticipated, unforeseen, unplanned for.

The important thing is to understand that the Holy Spirit is not subject to human control. You see, most of modern life and most of modern church life is all about human beings trying to control everything. We want to bring the universe under our control. So, we moderns have reduced everything to a technique. Here's how we control our public image: through social media curation and PR strategies and branding and self-presentation. Here's how we control the future: through planning and forecasting and insurance and risk-management. Here's how we manipulate our looks: through pills and Botox and surgery and supplements and biohacking. And churches do that. We hire all these experts who tell us how to have certain kinds of impacts. This is what we should do and that is what we should do. But the coming of the Spirit shatters all of that. The Spirit is subject to God's control. As Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3, the wind blows where it wills. You can't tell where it's coming from or where it's going. And so, the coming of the Spirit is a communal experience. It's a sudden experience not subject to human control or manipulation. And it is a felt experience.

**[SLIDE #8]** Experiencing the Holy Spirit is a felt experience.

**[SLIDE #9]** Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw

**what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. [Acts 2:2-3, NIV]**

When all the believers were gathered, they heard something. There was a sound. They felt something. It was like the blowing of a violent wind. They saw something. It seemed to be like tongues of fire that came to rest.

If you read any of the studies involving infant brain development, we learn that prematurely born babies who receive skin to skin contact show faster weight gain. They have improved brain development. Loving touch stimulates neural pathways in the brain and it helps a child with emotional regulation and cognitive growth. And children who were never touched, who were put in orphanages and never held struggle with emotional regulation. They struggle with cognitive development.

Touch teaches infants that they are loved and that they are safe. A mother's embrace calms an infant way more than words alone. Touch reduces our stress and cortisol levels and promotes emotional well-being. Couples who touch regularly report way more bonding and emotional satisfaction in their relationship. Touch can relieve physical pain and strengthen the immune system. An elderly person in a care facility who is touched respectfully and lovingly, just having their

hand held or a shoulder patted, will feel way less isolated and depressed. Touch affirms our dignity and our divine design.

I read a study of 20 different countries and how often people in those countries touched each other. This sociologist went to coffee shops around the world, and he watched two friends interacting. He literally sat there and counted the number of times people touched each other in the course of an hour. How many times do you think friends in England touched each other sitting over a table with coffee in the course of an hour? The answer is zero. How many times do you think people in the United States touched each other in the course of an hour? The answer is two. How many times do you think friends in Puerto Rico touched each other in the course of an hour? One hundred and eighty! And according to many surveys, despite poverty, people in Puerto Rico report being happier than people in England or the United States.

Have you ever noticed how many times in the gospel Jesus touched someone? Everywhere we see Jesus reaching out and touching people. Here's what we read in Mark 1, verses 40 and 41

**[SLIDE #10]** A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees,

**“If you are willing, you can make me clean.”**

**Jesus was indignant. He reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” [Mark 1:40-41, NIV]**

And, in raising Jairus's daughter from the dead, we read this about Jesus in Mark 5:41, 42:

**[SLIDE #11]** He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha koum!"

which means "Little girl, I say to you, get up!" Immediately the girl stood up and began to walk around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished. [Mark 5:41-42, NIV]

And here's how Jesus healed two blind men in Matthew 20:34:

**[SLIDE #12]** Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes.

Immediately they received their sight and followed him. [Matthew 20:34, NIV]

Jesus knows that what we humans need is to feel his touch. Let me ask you a personal question. Have you ever felt Jesus's touch by the Holy Spirit? If the answer is no, why don't you ask Jesus to touch you? If the answer is yes, how long has it been since you were lovingly touched by Jesus – a year ago? Five years ago? Thirty years ago? Some of us are like the old married couple where the wife complained, "You never kiss me or tell me that you love me," to which

the husband replied, “I kissed you and told you I loved you on our wedding day. If anything changes, I’ll let you know.”

Friends, it’s not enough that we receive words of affirmation from reading the Scripture. Those are incredibly important, we need to saturate ourselves with the Word of God. We need God’s Word piercing our hearts. But it’s not enough to hear God’s Words of affirmation – we have to feel God touch us by the Holy Spirit. Ask God for a felt experience of his Spirit!

The experience of the Spirit is a communal experience, it’s a sudden experience, it’s a felt experience, and

**[SLIDE #13]** Experiencing the Holy Spirit is a powerful experience.

Acts 2:2 reads

**[SLIDE #14]** Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. [Acts 2:2, NIV]

We read that the Holy Spirit came like the rush of a mighty wind. The Holy Spirit comes repeatedly in the Bible to empower people. Jesus says this in Acts 1, verse 8.

**[SLIDE #15] But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” [Acts 1:8, NIV]**

Throughout the Bible, folks are empowered especially prophetically to speak words of prophecy and to work miracles because of the Holy Spirit. The basic idea is that we cannot carry on the ministry of Jesus by techniques, by strategies alone, by church growth experts, by borrowing from what other churches are doing. We need to be empowered by the Spirit. The Bible is really clear that the way churches grow is through the power of the Spirit. Signs and wonders, healing, and the conversion of people who are far from God, are given by the Holy Spirit. Now listen. as I said before, we cannot make the Holy Spirit come. We don't control how the wind blows, but we can put up our sails to catch the wind when it blows. You know if you are into sailing, which I am not, but if you're into sailing you understand that putting up your sail doesn't make the wind blow. But if you don't put your sail up, you can't catch the wind when it blows. The same thing is true of us as followers of Jesus. We can't tell the Holy Spirit to come, but we can put ourselves in position so that when he comes, we will be influenced and empowered by the Spirit.

How can you put yourself in a position to catch the wind? Well, God frequently responds to prayer. We can get down on our knees and say, “God, come! Fill

me with your Spirit!” We can surrender to God on a regular basis, day by day in your own devotional life. Say, “Lord, I yield. Make me soft! Make me flexible! Make me pliable so that I can move with your Spirit.” We can stop resisting the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit says something to us, we can obey him instead of resisting and pushing in the other direction. How many times has the Holy Spirit tried to get you to do something and you just said “no?” “No, I don’t want to do it because it will cost me something. It’ll cost me money. It will cost me time. It will cost me a bit of my reputation. I’m not going to do what you say!” So we resist the Spirit. We can grieve the Holy Spirit by continually sinning against God. We can stop doing that. Again, we can’t control the Spirit’s movement but we can stop putting up walls to block the wind when it comes. We can open our doors and windows to receive the gentle breeze or the violent wind of God. We can put ourselves in positions to receive by going to meetings where the Holy Spirit is blowing. If you hear that the spirit is blowing and you need a touch from God, go there! Experience the Spirit!

The experience of the Spirit is a communal experience. It’s a sudden experience. It’s a felt experience. It’s a powerful experience. And finally, it is a missional experience.

**[SLIDE #16]** Experiencing the Holy Spirit is a missional experience.



As we just read in Acts 1:8,

**[SLIDE #17] But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” [Acts 1:8, NIV]**

The point of experiencing the Spirit is not just so that we get personally touched. God doesn't pour out His Spirit just so that we can have a private experience. The point of experiencing the Holy Spirit is to empower us for the sake of witness and mission.

So many people pursue spiritual experiences for their own sakes rather than for the sake of the world. It's the difference between the late Anthony Bourdain and lots of other foodies. Anthony Bourdain famously used food as a window into different cultures to try to increase cross-cultural connections. He was concerned about understanding others and food was his vehicle for building cross-cultural relationships.

But now, there are so many “foodies” or food influencers on social media who pursue exotic foods for its own sake so they can say, “I've eaten a tarantula, or I've eaten the world's most expensive ice-cream or I've eaten gold covered steaks. Exotic food has become another way to be completely self-focused and self-indulgent. In the same way, spiritual experience cannot terminate on itself. I

see so many people running from one meeting to another “I heard so and so prophetic minister is coming to Columbus,” or “I’m going to a healing conference in Indianapolis.” They’re always seeking a new and more exotic spiritual experiences.

The reason that God sends his Spirit to touch us is not only for ourselves. The point is not just that we will feel good, but so that we can do good. Of course, we need to experience personal renewal and blessing. But personal blessing always must flow out to bring blessing to the world. This is everywhere in the Bible. Why did God choose Abraham out of all the people on the earth? He blessed Abraham so that Abraham would be a blessing to others. Why did God choose Israel out of all the nations of the earth? He chose Israel so that Israel could be a light to the world. Why did God choose Jesus to be the Messiah and Savior of the world? It was so that he could give his life as a ransom for many. Why does God send his Holy Spirit and give his children spiritual experiences? So that we could be a witness to others.

- We get it in order to give it.
- We are blessed to be a blessing.
- God fills us so that we can overflow to others.
- God gives to us so that God can give through us.
- We get set on fire so that we can bring light to others.
- We inhale the Spirit so that we can exhale the gospel.

The founder of the Vineyard movement, John Wimber, who became my spiritual father in the faith said, “Don’t tell me what happened to you when you fell down as a result of prayer. Tell me what you did when you got back up.” Spiritual experience that doesn’t flow out to the world becomes rancid and self-indulgent. ‘We are not designed to be reservoirs. We are designed to be rivers. Again, the point is not just to feel good, but to do good.

There’s an old hymn that is called “Make Me a Blessing.” Its chorus goes like this:

**[SLIDE #18] Make me a blessing, make me a blessing.**

**Out of my life may Jesus shine;**

**Make me a blessing, O Savior, I pray,**

**Make me a blessing to someone today.**

That is the prayer of a Christian who daily prays, “Fill me with the Holy Spirit.” It’s so that God will make us a blessing to someone today.

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July 20, 2025

*People of His Presence*

Acts 2:1-4

- I. Experiencing the Holy Spirit is a communal experience
- II. Experiencing the Holy Spirit is a sudden experience
- III. Experiencing the Holy Spirit is a felt experience
- IV. Experiencing the Holy Spirit is a powerful experience
- V. Experiencing the Holy Spirit is a missional experience