

## Three meanings of the word “spirit”

### **Introduction**

In many cases, a single word in Scripture can have **multiple meanings**. That is, the same word can mean different things – depending on the *context* in question.

One example of a Scriptural term that has multiple meanings is the word **heaven**. Another article on this site (found [here](#)) provided examples of four separate meanings of the word “heaven”:

- The atmosphere around the earth;
- Outer space;
- The place where God resides;
- God, Himself.

It appears that there are multiple meanings of the term **spirit** as well. Of course, one very specific use of the word “spirit” occurs in the phrase Holy Spirit – i.e., the phrase that refers to God’s “power and presence”.

However, there are several other uses of the word “spirit” as well – i.e., uses *other than* in the phrase Holy Spirit.

So, let’s take a look at some of the other uses of the word “spirit” in Scripture – to determine if there are any **other** meanings of that term.

### **Spirit as an “Emotional State”**

To begin with, Scripture contains quite a few examples in which the term “spirit” is used to refer to a person’s “state of mind”. In other words, in this context, “spirit” refers to the way people are *thinking* or *feeling* at a given point in time. Here are some examples of this use of spirit:

#### **Isaiah 19:14 (ESV):**

<sup>14</sup> The LORD has mingled within her **a spirit of** confusion, and they will make Egypt stagger in all its deeds, as a drunken man staggers in his vomit.

#### **Hosea 4:12 (ESV):**

<sup>12</sup> My people inquire of a piece of wood, and their walking staff gives them oracles. For **a spirit of** whoredom has led them astray, and they have left their God to play the whore.

#### **Zechariah 12:10 (ESV):**

<sup>10</sup> “And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem **a spirit of** grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn.

#### **Romans 11:9 (ESV):**

as it is written, “God gave them **a spirit of** stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day.”

**1 Corinthians 4:21 (ESV):**

What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in **a spirit of** gentleness?

**Galatians 6:1 (ESV):**

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in **a spirit of** gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.

Interestingly, our own culture **also** uses this meaning of the word “spirit”. For example, we might encourage people to “get in the Christmas **spirit**”; or someone might say “I am in very low **spirits** today”.

In any case, this use of spirit as an “emotional state” is the most “straightforward” of the meanings of spirit in Scripture.

**Spirit as our “Life Force”**

Another, completely **different** way that Scripture uses the word spirit is as our “life force” – i.e., as the *energy* that animates our bodies, and causes us to become **alive**.

Basically, in this context, “spirit” is essentially a synonym for “the breath of life”.

To demonstrate this, first consider this verse:

**Genesis 2:7 (KJV):**

<sup>7</sup> And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.

The above verse tells us the following: First, God formed Adam’s body. Adam was not alive at that point, though – he was simply a dead body. Then, God filled Adam with the “breath of life”. That caused Adam’s body to become *alive* – so at **that** point, he became a living soul – i.e., a *conscious*, living person.

Now consider this verse:

**James 2:26 (ESV):**

<sup>26</sup> For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

That verse tells us that if a person’s body does not have the **spirit** in it, then his body is **dead**.

Now, compare that to what happened in Genesis 2:7, above. Basically, before God filled Adam’s body with the breath of life, his body was dead.

In other words, when Adam’s body did not have the **breath of life** in it, his body was **dead**.

As a result, the combination of Genesis 2:7 and James 2:26 certainly appears to indicate that in this context, the “spirit” is a synonym for the “breath of life”.

There is *another* example of this correlation between “breath” and “spirit” as well. In fact, this particular correlation has both terms appearing in the same chapter – the chapter of Ezekiel 37.

That chapter contains the famous “dry bones” prophesy – in which Ezekiel sees the bones of many dead Israelites; and then God resurrects those Israelites. Take a look at the wording that is used, when God causes the Israelites’ bodies to become **alive**:

**Ezekiel 37:7-10,13-14 (ESV):**

<sup>7</sup> So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. <sup>8</sup> And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. <sup>9</sup> Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.” <sup>10</sup> So I prophesied as he commanded me, and **the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet**, an exceedingly great army.

<sup>13</sup> And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. <sup>14</sup> And **I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live**, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord.”

As shown above, Ezekiel 37 also appears to demonstrate that in this context, both “spirit” and “breath” refer to the “life force”, that causes our bodies to become alive.

Finally, this meaning of spirit as “life force” is *presumably* the meaning that the apostle Paul had in mind, when he *contrasted* “spirit” with “soul” and “body” in this verse:

**1 Thessalonians 5:23 (ESV):**

<sup>23</sup> Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole **spirit** and **soul** and **body** be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The reason why Paul is (presumably) referring to the spirit as our “life force” is because those *same* three items are also contained in Genesis 2:7, above. As listed there, God first created Adam’s **body**; then God filled Adam with the breath of life (i.e., the **spirit**); and finally Adam became a living **soul**. So, it would appear that Paul is using those same terms in the same way.

Note: a more detailed discussion of spirit – in the context of body, soul and spirit – can be found [here](#).

**Spirit as our “Connection to God”**

Finally, it is *possible* that there is at least one *additional* meaning of the term “spirit” in Scripture. This meaning of spirit refers to our “connection to God” – i.e., it refers to our ability to “communicate” with God, and to “sense His presence”, on a very “personal” level.

To my knowledge, there are **no** verses in Scripture, which *explicitly* refer to **spirit** as our “connection to God”. As a result, this particular meaning is based upon *inferences*, rather than upon explicit statements. Nevertheless, a relatively plausible case can be made for this particular meaning.

To a certain extent, this meaning of “spirit” can be thought of as a small “portion” of Holy Spirit. For example, if a man has a extremely personal “connection” to God, then that indicates that God has given the man some small “portion” of His Holy Spirit – and it is that portion of Holy Spirit which allows the man to “communicate” with God very closely.

So, in this context, the small “portion” of the Holy Spirit that resides in the man would be referred to as his “spirit”.

One of the passages that is used, to try to demonstrate this “connection to God” meaning, is contained in the narrative of Adam and Eve. Basically, when Adam and Eve were in Eden, they definitely were in very close communication with God. Not only did God speak to them, but they were also able to *sense* God’s **presence**. For example, consider this passage:

**Genesis 3:8-10 (ESV):**

<sup>8</sup> And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. <sup>9</sup> But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” <sup>10</sup> And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.”

That passage tells us that Adam and Eve were able to “hear God walking in the garden”. This seems to indicate that they had a very “close”, *personal* relationship with Him – as opposed to God just “giving them orders”.

This close personal relationship apparently ended, after Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden – because after that, there are no further accounts of them “sensing God’s presence” any longer. With that in mind, consider this passage:

**Genesis 2:16-17 (ESV):**

<sup>16</sup> And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, <sup>17</sup> but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”

That passage states that in the **day** that Adam eats from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he will **die**. Needless to say, Adam’s body did not die on that day – he lived for many *centuries* after that day.

Of course, it is true that in many cases, Scripture uses the word “day” in a figurative sense. For example, 2 Peter 3:8 tells us that “with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day”. So, it is possible that in this case, God was basically telling Adam that “on the day you eat from that tree, you will become *fated to eventually die*”.

However, as noted above, Adam and Eve’s “connection to God” apparently ended on the literal day that they ate from the tree. So, it is also possible that when God told Adam that he would “die” on that day, He was referring to Adam’s *spiritual* death – i.e., that Adam’s connection to God would be **lost** on that day.

The above passages discuss the **loss** of Adam and Eve's connection to God. Now, consider the following passage:

**Matthew 3:13-17 (ESV):**

<sup>13</sup> Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. <sup>14</sup> John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" <sup>15</sup> But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. <sup>16</sup> And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; <sup>17</sup> and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

The above passage about the baptism of Jesus is very instructive. First of all, the passage tells us that after his baptism, the "heavens were opened" to Jesus. This presumably means that Jesus gained an understanding of heavenly things – *and* that he entered into much closer "communication" with God. The fact that God spoke from heaven is further evidence of this communication.

Also notice that the Spirit of God – i.e., the Holy Spirit – descended from heaven, and came to rest on Jesus. This certainly seems to indicate that God "filled" Jesus with the Holy Spirit – i.e., that He gave Jesus a "portion" of Holy Spirit.

Those two items, taken together, seem to imply that in *this* context the term "spirit" refers to our "connection to God" – and that that connection is established by God giving us a portion of the Holy Spirit.

If the above meaning is correct, then the following statements would be true:

- When Adam was first created, he **did** have a personal connection to God – because he had a portion of Holy Spirit. However, Adam *lost* his connection to God, because of his disobedience.

- When Jesus was first created, he did **not** have a personal connection to God – because he did not have a portion of Holy Spirit. However, Jesus *established* his connection to God, by his obedience.

If true, those statements give us yet another indication of the "symmetrical contrast" between Adam and Jesus.

## **Conclusion**

As listed above, it appears that there are at least three meanings of the term "spirit" in Scripture:

1. Spirit as an "emotional state";
2. Spirit as our "life force";
3. Spirit as our "connection to God".

In addition, it appears that in some cases, meanings 2 and 3 are "combined". In other words, in some instances, the term "spirit" refers **both** to our life force, **and** to our connection to God. For example, consider this verse:

**Luke 23:46 (ESV):**

<sup>46</sup> Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commit my **spirit!**” And having said this he breathed his last.

In the above verse, Jesus is dying – i.e., his “life force” is leaving him. So, at least *one* of the meanings of “spirit” in that verse is the “energy” that animated Jesus’ body.

However, it appears unlikely that that is the only meaning of spirit in that verse. Basically, if Jesus was *only* referring to raw, impersonal “energy”, then it doesn’t seem to make sense for him to say “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit”. In other words, it appears that Jesus was referring to a much more “personal” meaning of spirit.

Certainly, our emotions are personal – but emotions are not permanent (i.e., they change over time). Also, when we die, we become completely unconscious – i.e., dead people do not have any emotions whatsoever.

So, it appears that in the above verse, Jesus was referring to his “connection to God”. In other words, he was using the term “spirit” to refer to the portion of Holy Spirit that God had given him. This makes sense, since Jesus’ connection to God was very personal – and because the Holy Spirit is permanent.

Another, even more instructive passage in this same vein is the following:

**Acts 7:54-60 (ESV):**

<sup>54</sup> Now when they [the Jews] heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. <sup>55</sup> But he [Stephen], full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. <sup>56</sup> And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” <sup>57</sup> But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. <sup>58</sup> Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. <sup>59</sup> And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my **spirit.**” <sup>60</sup> And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

In the above passage, Stephen is dying. So, similar to the passage in Luke, at least *one* of the meanings of “spirit” in that passage is the “energy” that animated Stephen’s body.

However, the passage also tells us that Stephen was full of Holy Spirit – and **because of that**, he saw a *vision* of God and Jesus. In other words, the passage makes a strong connection between the fact that Stephen had a portion of Holy Spirit, and the fact that Stephen had a personal connection to God.

As a result, when Stephen said “Lord Jesus, receive my **spirit**“, it appears that he was referring to his portion of Holy Spirit – which gave him his connection to God.

This “dual meaning” of spirit – “life force” and “connection to God” – certainly seems to make sense, in the above two passages.