

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

PNEUMATOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit

UNIT 3: THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Lesson 6

The Spirit in Creation and Providence

The Breath of God Over the Waters

The Spirit Is Not a New Testament Novelty — He Was Present from the First Word

Key Texts: Genesis 1:2; Job 33:4; Psalm 33:6; Psalm 104:29–30; Genesis 6:3

“The Spirit of God Was Moving Over the Surface of the Waters”

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Series Verse

*“But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes,
He will guide you into all the truth;
for He will not speak on His own initiative,
but whatever He hears, He will speak;
and He will disclose to you what is to come.”*

John 16:13, NASB 1995

Introduction

With Lesson 6 we cross another significant threshold. The first five lessons of this series have been devoted to prolegomena and to the Person of the Holy Spirit: who He is in Himself, what constitutes His personal being, what it means that He is God, and how He is related to the Father and the Son within the eternal Trinitarian life. Beginning with this lesson, we turn from the Spirit's Person to His works, from ontology to economy, from being to acting, from the eternal to the historical. And we begin precisely where the Bible begins: at the creation of the world.

Unit 3 of this series, "The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament", is often neglected in pneumatological study, for understandable but regrettable reasons. The dramatic outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2), the New Testament's rich pneumatological vocabulary, and the church's own experience of the Spirit's indwelling since the apostolic age all conspire to make the Spirit's Old Testament ministry seem preliminary, shadowy, and of secondary interest compared to what comes after. This impression is mistaken, and correcting it is one of the principal aims of this unit.

The Spirit is not a New Testament novelty. He is not a divine Person who appeared on the scene when the tongues of fire descended at Pentecost and who had previously played no significant role in the history of creation and redemption. He is the Spirit who hovered over the formless void before a single created thing existed. He is the Spirit whose breath animated the first human being and who sustains every living creature in every moment of its existence. He is the Spirit who equipped Israel's leaders, who spoke through Israel's prophets, and who made the entire Old Covenant a forward-pointing anticipation of the New Covenant's Spirit-filled realities. To understand the Spirit's New Testament ministry rightly, one must first understand His Old Testament ministry, not as a foil that makes the New look better by comparison, but as the deep root from which everything that Pentecost inaugurated has grown.

This lesson focuses on the most foundational dimension of the Spirit's Old Testament ministry: His role in creation and providence. Before the Spirit equips leaders and empowers prophets (Lesson 7), before He makes promises that point forward to the New Covenant (Lesson 8), He is present and active at the very origin of all that exists. The first thing the Bible tells us about the Spirit after the creation of the heavens and the earth is that He was there, hovering, brooding, moving over the face of the deep. From the first breath of creation to the last sigh of the dying creature, the Spirit of God is the animating, sustaining, governing presence of God within the created order. This is the foundation on which all subsequent pneumatology rests.

I. Ruach: The Hebrew Word That Carries a World

Spirit, Breath, and Wind, The Semantic Range of the Spirit's Name in the Old Testament

A. The Lexical Range of Ruach

Before engaging the specific pneumatological texts of the Old Testament, it is essential to understand the Hebrew word that serves as the primary Old Testament designation for the Spirit of God: ruach. This single Hebrew word carries a semantic range that English translations are structurally unable to preserve. Ruach can mean (1) wind, the movement of air in the natural world; (2) breath, the breath of living creatures and specifically the breath of life; and (3) spirit, the animating, personal, immaterial principle within a being, and especially the Spirit of God. The English translations must choose one meaning in each context and sacrifice the others, but the Hebrew text exploits the full range of the word's semantic depth, and the interpreter who reads only English is constantly in danger of missing the resonances that the original language preserves.

The breadth of ruach's semantic range is not incidental but theologically purposive. The God of Scripture is the God who is present and active in creation at every level of its existence, in the wind that moves the clouds, in the breath that sustains the living creature, in the Spirit who governs and directs all things toward His appointed ends. The word ruach holds all three of these together, resisting the compartmentalization that separates the "natural" from the "supernatural," the physical from the spiritual, the material from the divine. In the Old Testament's understanding of the world, the wind that blows and the breath that gives life and the Spirit who governs all things are not three separate realities; they are three dimensions of the one divine power that undergirds and pervades the created order.

The theological implication is significant: when the Old Testament speaks of the ruach of God, it is speaking of the divine presence within creation in its most immediate and comprehensive form. The Spirit of God is not an occasional divine visitor to the created order; He is the immanent, pervasive, life-giving, order-sustaining presence of the Creator within His creation, as intimate to every living creature as its own breath, and as sovereign over all things as the wind that blows where it will and no one knows whence it comes or whither it goes (cf. John 3:8). To understand ruach is to understand the Old Testament's pneumatology of creation, and to understand that pneumatology is to discover that the created world has always been, from its very first moment, a Spirit-pervaded world.

B. The Greek Pneuma and the Continuity of the Testaments

The New Testament's primary pneumatological word, pneuma (from which English derives "pneumatology"), is the Greek word the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, used to render ruach. The Septuagint's translators faced the same challenge English translators face: pneuma, like ruach, can mean wind, breath, or spirit, and the translation must choose a rendering for each context. But the Septuagint's consistent use of pneuma to translate ruach means that the New Testament's pneumatological vocabulary is directly continuous with the Old Testament's. When Paul writes of the pneuma of God, he is writing in the same pneumatological vocabulary that Moses used, and the semantic range of the word, with all its

overtones of breath and wind and spirit, is not lost but is exploited throughout the New Testament's own pneumatological witness.

This lexical continuity between the Testaments is one of the strongest arguments against the view that the Spirit is a New Testament innovation. The God who acts in both Testaments is the same Triune God, and the Spirit who acts in the New Testament is the same Spirit who acted in the Old, not a different Person who appears at Pentecost, but the same eternal Spirit whose ministry in the Old Covenant was selective, temporary, and typologically anticipatory, and whose ministry in the New Covenant is universal, permanent, and eschatologically fulfilling. The difference between the Testaments in pneumatological terms is not a difference in Persons but a difference in the manner, scope, and redemptive-historical significance of the Spirit's ministry.

II. Genesis 1:2, The Spirit at the Origin of All Things

Hovering Over the Deep Before Creation Begins

A. The Exegesis of Genesis 1:2

The second verse of the Bible introduces the Holy Spirit into the narrative of creation with a brevity and a density that have occupied the attention of interpreters across three millennia: "The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters" (Genesis 1:2, NASB 1995). The verse describes the condition of the earth immediately following its initial creation "in the beginning" (v. 1) and immediately before the ordered, six-day creative work that follows (vv. 3–31). It is the threshold between the initial divine fiat of creation and the unfolding creative acts that give the world its form, its order, and its life.

The phrase "the Spirit of God" (*ruach Elohim*) is the first explicit mention of the Spirit in canonical Scripture. His presence is introduced without explanation or fanfare, as though the reader should already know what the Spirit of God is and what His presence means. He is not named for the first time; He is encountered for the first time within the narrative of creation, already active, already present, already engaged with the world that is being called into being.

The verb "was moving" translates the Hebrew *mārachāpēt*, a Piel participle that appears only twice in the entire Old Testament: here in Genesis 1:2 and in Deuteronomy 32:11, where it describes an eagle hovering (*rāchap*) over its nest to protect and to rouse its young. The image is striking and deliberate: the Spirit of God broods over the face of the waters as a mother bird broods over her nest, with protective presence, with creative anticipation, with the nurturing energy that precedes and enables the emergence of new life. The Spirit's presence over the formless void is not a passive observation; it is an active, creative hovering that signals the imminent bursting forth of ordered, living, God-glorifying creation.

The pneumatological significance of Genesis 1:2 is threefold. First, it establishes that the Spirit was present and active before the creation of any living thing, which means that His life-giving work in the economy of redemption, His regenerating, vivifying, sanctifying work in the souls of

God's people, is an extension of the same creative power He exercised at the origin of the cosmos. The Spirit who regenerates (John 3:5–8) is the same Spirit who hovered over the primordial waters; the new birth is a new creation by the same Agent who authored the first. Second, it establishes the Trinitarian character of the original creative act: the Father speaks ("God said", v. 3), the Word mediates (cf. John 1:3; Colossians 1:16), and the Spirit hovers, the one God creates in the unity of three Persons. Third, it establishes the Spirit's primordial connection to the created order: He is not a stranger to the material world but has been present within it from its very first moment, as the life-giving breath that animates and the brooding presence that orders.

B. Trinitarian Creation and Its Pneumatological Dimension

The Genesis 1:2 picture of the Spirit's role in creation is confirmed and amplified by a network of Old Testament texts that attribute the creation of the world to the Spirit of God alongside the Father and the Son. Psalm 33:6 states: "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of His mouth all their host." The parallelism of the verse is theologically precise: the Word of the Lord (*memra' Adonai*, the divine Word or Logos) and the breath of His mouth (*ruach piv*, the Spirit of God) are the two divine agents through whom the creation of the heavens and their host is accomplished. Father, Word, and Spirit, the one God creates through the concursive action of the eternal Trinitarian relations that have their eternal ground in the immanent Trinity and their temporal expression in the economy of creation.

Job 26:13 adds another dimension: "By His breath (*ruach*) the heavens are cleared; His hand has pierced the fleeing serpent." The Spirit's breath clears the heavens, an image of creative ordering and sovereign governance over the created order. Proverbs 8:27–30, though speaking of Wisdom (which the tradition has consistently associated with the eternal Son) rather than of the Spirit directly, presents the same picture of the entire Trinitarian Godhead present and active in the work of creation: "When He established the heavens, I was there, when He inscribed a circle on the face of the deep, when He made firm the skies above, when the springs of the deep became fixed, when He set for the sea its boundary so that the water would not transgress His command, when He marked out the foundations of the earth; then I was beside Him, as a master workman; and I was daily His delight, rejoicing before Him always." The creative work is Trinitarian through and through: Father, Word, and Spirit each present, each active, each essential to the one creative act.

III. The Spirit as the Agent of Biological Life

He Gives the Breath That Animates Every Living Creature

A. Job 33:4, The Spirit Made Me

Job 33:4 presents one of the most direct Old Testament attributions of creaturely life to the Spirit of God: "The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life." The speaker is Elihu, the youngest of Job's interlocutors, who prefaces his argument with this humble acknowledgment of his own dependence on the Spirit for his existence and his speech. The verse's pneumatological claim is strikingly direct: the Spirit of God is the one who has made

Elihu, not merely the one who assisted in his making, not merely the one who gave a general divine blessing to his formation, but the active Agent whose creative work constitutes Elihu's personal existence. The breath of the Almighty (*nishmat Shaddai*) is the animating life-principle that makes the formed creature a living being.

The verse echoes and expands the creation account of Genesis 2:7: "Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life (*nishmat chayyim*); and man became a living being." The breath (*nishmat*) that God breathed into Adam's nostrils is the divine *ruach*, the Spirit-breath of God that transforms inert physical matter into a living, personal, spiritual being capable of knowing and relating to God. The creation of human beings is, from the very beginning of Scripture, pneumatological: it is the Spirit of God who makes the human creature "and breathes into him the breath of life," crossing the infinite qualitative distance between matter and spirit, between clay and person, between the lifeless and the living.

The pastoral implication is profound and far-reaching: every human being who has ever lived owes his or her existence, at the most immediate and intimate level, to the Spirit of God. The atheist breathes by the grace of the Spirit. The pagan artist creates beauty by the Spirit's impartation of the image of God. The rebellious sinner exercises the rational, moral, and creative capacities that make sin genuinely culpable, that make it a real transgression of a known law rather than a mere failure of mechanism, because those capacities are gifts of the Spirit who made him and breathes life into him. The Spirit of God is not the exclusive property of the regenerate; He is the Creator-Spirit who sustains all creaturely life, and His presence in the created order is the pneumatological ground of the common grace by which God restrains evil and enables human flourishing even in a fallen world.

B. Psalm 104:29–30, The Spirit Sustains and Renews All Creatures

If Job 33:4 establishes the Spirit's role in the original creation of each individual living being, Psalm 104:29–30 establishes His ongoing, moment-by-moment role in the sustaining of all created life. The great creation psalm, which moves from the founding of the earth (v. 5) through the provision of water (vv. 6–13) and vegetation (vv. 14–18) to the ordering of day and night (vv. 19–23) and the provision of food for all creatures (vv. 24–28), reaches its pneumatological climax in verses 29–30: "You hide Your face, they are dismayed; You take away their spirit (*ruach*), they expire and return to their dust. You send forth Your Spirit (*ruach*), they are created; and You renew the face of the ground" (NASB 1995).

The structure of the verse is a paired contrast: the withdrawal of the divine *ruach* produces death and dissolution, while the sending forth of the divine *ruach* produces creation and renewal. Two movements, the taking away and the sending forth of the Spirit, account for the entire cycle of creaturely life, death, and renewal that constitutes the providential history of the created order. When God withdraws His Spirit, creatures die and return to dust. When God sends forth His Spirit, creatures are created and the face of the ground is renewed. The Spirit is the hinge of existence for everything that lives, the sole distinction between life and death for every creature in the cosmos.

The pneumatological implications of Psalm 104:29–30 extend in two directions. Downward, toward natural creation: the ordinary biological processes of birth, growth, death, and renewal that constitute the ecological rhythms of the natural world are not self-sustaining mechanisms running on their own internal energy; they are the Spirit’s continuous creative and sustaining act. Every bird that hatches, every tree that grows, every creature that breathes owes its life in each moment to the Spirit’s ongoing, sovereign gift of existence. Upward, toward new creation: the same Spirit who renews the face of the ground in the natural order is the Spirit who regenerates the fallen sinner in the order of redemption. The new birth (John 3:5–8) is the eschatological sending forth of the Spirit into the dead spiritual interior of the human being, the same creative act that Psalm 104:30 describes at the level of biological creation, now performed at the level of spiritual creation.

“The Spirit of God has made me” | “You send forth Your Spirit, they are created” | “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made”

Job 33:4; Psalm 104:30; Psalm 33:6, NASB 1995

IV. The Spirit in Providence: Governing the Created Order

The Spirit Who Sustains, Orders, and Directs All Things

A. Providence Defined and Distinguished from Creation

Creation and providence are related but distinct categories in systematic theology. Creation is the act by which God brought the universe into existence out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), freely and without necessity, for His own glory. Providence is the act by which God sustains the universe in existence, governs all its events and processes, and directs all things toward His appointed ends, the consummation of all things in the glory of Christ and the blessing of His people. Both creation and providence are divine works, and both involve the Spirit. Creation is the Spirit’s inaugural act in the order of the world; providence is His ongoing, continuous, moment-by-moment activity within that world.

The Westminster Confession of Faith (Chapter V, Of Providence) defines providence with characteristic precision: God, the great Creator of all things, upholds, directs, disposes, and governs all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most holy providence, according to His infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will, to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy. The pneumatological dimension of this providential government is pervasive but often unarticulated: the Spirit of God is the divine Agent through whom this sovereign governance is exercised within the created order. It is not that the Father governs from a distance through the Spirit’s mediation; it is that the one Triune God governs all things in the unity of the three Persons, and the Spirit’s role is the intimate, inward, pervasive presence of the divine governance within creation itself.

B. The Spirit's Role in the Governance of History

The Spirit's providential work is not confined to the biological, the sustaining of creaturely life as described in Psalm 104:29–30. It extends to the governance of human history, the ordering of nations, and the direction of all things toward the goal that God has appointed. Nehemiah 9:20 recounts God's provision for Israel in the wilderness and attributes it comprehensively to the Spirit: "You gave Your good Spirit to instruct them, Your manna You did not withhold from their mouth, and You gave them water for their thirst." The Spirit's instruction of Israel, alongside the miraculous provision of manna and water, is presented as a dimension of God's providential care for His covenant people.

Isaiah 40:7 attributes to the Spirit the withering of the grass that represents the transience of all creaturely power in contrast to the eternal stability of God's Word: "The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath (ruach) of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass." The ruach of the Lord, here functioning in its "wind" dimension, but with its full pneumatological resonance, is the power that brings human glory and creaturely pride to nothing, demonstrating that the Word of God alone endures forever (Isaiah 40:8). The Spirit's providential work includes not only the sustaining of life but the humbling of human pretension, the assertion of divine sovereignty over all that is creaturely, transient, and dependent.

Ezekiel 37:1 introduces the famous vision of the valley of dry bones with the statement that "the hand of the Lord was upon" Ezekiel, and the vision itself ends with the divine promise: "I will put My Spirit within you and you will come to life" (v. 14). Though the primary reference of this text is to the eschatological restoration of Israel rather than to natural creation, the imagery deliberately echoes the creation account: as the Spirit hovered over the formless void and brought order and life from chaos, so the Spirit will hover over the valley of dry bones and bring life from death, restoration from ruin, a nation from its dissolution. The Spirit's providential governance of history is directed toward a promised goal: the new creation that the Old Testament's prophetic vision increasingly anticipates and toward which the Spirit's entire Old Testament ministry is oriented.

V. The Withdrawal of the Spirit as Judgment

My Spirit Shall Not Strive with Man Forever

A. Genesis 6:3 and the Spirit's Striving

One of the most theologically rich and most neglected pneumatological texts in the Old Testament is Genesis 6:3, which records the divine word that precedes the judgment of the flood: "Then the Lord said, 'My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh; nevertheless his days shall be one hundred and twenty years.'" The verse is brief, elliptical, and interpretively challenging, its precise meaning has been debated across the centuries of exegetical history. But its central pneumatological claim is clear: the Spirit of God has been "striving" (Hebrew: *dīn*, to judge, to plead, to contend) with humanity, and a limit has been announced on the duration of that striving.

The Spirit's striving in Genesis 6:3 is best understood as His convicting, restraining, and life-giving presence within the antediluvian world, the divine ruach that sustains creaturely life, restrains the full expression of human sin, and calls the human creature back toward its Creator. This striving corresponds to what the New Testament calls the Spirit's work of conviction (John 16:8–11), the Spirit's inward pressure upon the human conscience that exposes sin, calls to righteousness, and warns of judgment. The antediluvian world had been the recipient of this striving Spirit for generations, but the corruption of humanity had become so pervasive and so willful that God announces the limit of this age of restraint: within a hundred and twenty years, judgment will fall.

The theological principle embedded in Genesis 6:3 is one of the most sobering in all of Scripture: the Spirit's striving is not eternal in the sense of being infinite in duration for any individual or any generation. There is a patience of God, a season of the Spirit's convicting and restraining work, that has an end. "My Spirit shall not strive with man forever." The door of the ark was eventually shut (Genesis 7:16), and no further striving availed. This principle reappears throughout the Old Testament in the language of the hardening of the heart (Exodus 4:21; Romans 9:18), in Isaiah's commission to preach to a people who will not understand (Isaiah 6:9–10), and in the New Testament's teaching about the blasphemy against the Spirit (Matthew 12:31–32), the definitive, willful, final rejection of the Spirit's testimony about Christ, which has no forgiveness precisely because it has rejected the only Agent through whom forgiveness comes.

B. The Spirit's Withdrawal and the Reality of Judgment

The other side of the Spirit's life-giving sustaining work is the terrifying reality of His withdrawal. Psalm 104:29 puts it with unmerciful clarity: "You hide Your face, they are dismayed; You take away their spirit (ruach), they expire and return to their dust." The withdrawal of the Spirit is death, physical death, spiritual death, the dissolution of the creature into the nothingness from which it came. The creature has no life of its own; it lives entirely on borrowed divine breath, and when that breath is withheld, nothing remains.

This principle operates at the level of both individuals and nations. Saul's tragic history illustrates the Spirit's withdrawal from an individual: "Now the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord terrorized him" (1 Samuel 16:14). The departure of the Spirit from Saul is not a cosmic pneumatological event; it is the withdrawal of the Spirit's special equipping presence from a man who had repeatedly and willfully refused to walk in the way of the Lord. It left Saul in a condition that was, in the deepest sense, the natural condition of a human being abandoned by the Spirit: disordered, terrified, increasingly irrational, and destructive. David's prayer in Psalm 51:11, "Do not cast me away from Your presence and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me", reflects the full force of this Old Covenant pneumatological reality: to have the Spirit taken away is to be abandoned to the darkness of one's own sinful nature, without the restraining, ordering, life-giving presence of God.

At the level of nations, the prophets describe the Spirit's withdrawal as the ultimate consequence of covenant unfaithfulness. Isaiah's vision of the desolation of Edom (Isaiah 34) and Ezekiel's vision of the glory departing from the temple (Ezekiel 10–11) both represent, in

different ways, the withdrawal of the divine presence, the Spirit's presence, from those who have persistently rejected His testimony. The departure of the divine glory from the temple is the most dramatic pneumatological judgment in the entire Old Testament: the shekinah that had filled Solomon's temple, representing the Spirit's dwelling among His covenant people, rises, moves to the threshold, moves to the east gate, and finally departs to the east, leaving an empty house that will be given over to destruction (Ezekiel 10:18–19; 11:22–23). The judgment that follows, the Babylonian exile, the destruction of Jerusalem, is the consequence of the Spirit's withdrawal from a people who had made His presence unwelcome.

VI. The Spirit Is Not a New Testament Novelty

The Continuity of the Spirit's Work Across Both Testaments

A. The Error of Pneumatological Discontinuity

A significant and recurring error in the church's pneumatological reflection is the tendency to read the Old and New Testaments as representing a radical discontinuity in the Spirit's ministry, as though the Spirit were essentially absent from the Old Covenant and essentially present in the New. This error appears in several forms. In its mildest form, it produces a neglect of the Old Testament's pneumatological witness, treating the Spirit as a New Testament figure whose story really begins at Pentecost. In its more acute form, it produces a dispensationalist pneumatology that treats the Spirit's Old Testament ministry as so different from His New Testament ministry as to constitute a qualitatively different kind of divine involvement with human beings. In its most extreme form, it produces a Marcionite tendency to read the Old Testament as the book of a different God, a God without Spirit, a God of law and judgment rather than of grace and life.

All of these errors are refuted by the evidence of this lesson. The Spirit was present at the creation of the world (Genesis 1:2). He is the source of every breath drawn by every living creature (Job 33:4; Psalm 104:30). He has been striving with humanity since before the flood (Genesis 6:3). He inspired the psalmists, the prophets, and the wisdom writers whose Spirit-breathed words constitute the canonical Old Testament. He equipped the leaders, empowered the deliverers, and anointed the kings of Israel (to be covered in Lesson 7). He made the entire Old Covenant a prophetic anticipation of the New Covenant's Spirit-filled realities (to be covered in Lesson 8). The Spirit of the Old Testament and the Spirit of the New Testament are the same Person, the eternal Third Person of the Holy Trinity, whose ministry in the Old Covenant was genuinely different in its redemptive-historical character but not absent, not minimal, and not qualitatively other.

B. The Progressive Character of the Spirit's Ministry

The correct framework for understanding the relationship between the Spirit's Old Testament and New Testament ministries is not discontinuity but progressive covenantal fulfillment. The Spirit's Old Covenant ministry was genuine but anticipatory, it was the ministry of the same Person who would be poured out at Pentecost, but it was a ministry calibrated to the redemptive-historical moment of the Old Covenant, which was itself a typological anticipation

of the New. The Spirit equipped Old Covenant leaders for their Old Covenant tasks; He would equip New Covenant believers for their New Covenant calling. He inspired Old Covenant prophets to speak words that pointed forward to Christ; He would inspire New Testament apostles to record the fulfillment of those words in Christ. He dwelt with His covenant people in the tabernacle and the temple; He would dwell within His covenant people in the New Covenant age.

The New Testament's own pneumatological teaching reflects this progressive covenantal framework. Jesus, in John 7:37–39, speaks of the Spirit who “was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified”, pointing to a genuine redemptive-historical newness in the Spirit's New Covenant ministry that is not mere quantitative increase but qualitative fulfillment of what the Old Covenant had typologically anticipated. But “not yet given” is not “never before present.” The Spirit had been present, had been working, had been striving, but not yet given in the fullness and universality that Pentecost inaugurates. The creation pneumatology of this lesson is the foundation that makes the Pentecost pneumatology of the New Testament intelligible: it was always the same Spirit, always the same divine Person, always the same life-giving, order-sustaining, covenant-directing presence of the Triune God within His creation and among His people.

*“You send forth Your Spirit, they are created;
and You renew the face of the ground.”*

Psalm 104:30, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Ruach	The primary Hebrew word for the Spirit of God in the Old Testament, with a semantic range that encompasses wind, breath, and spirit. The breadth of ruach's meaning is theologically purposive: God's Spirit is as intimate to the creature as its own breath and as sovereign as the wind. The Septuagint consistently translates ruach with the Greek <i>pneuma</i> , establishing the lexical continuity between the Old Testament's pneumatological vocabulary and the New Testament's. A pneumatology that does not reckon with the full semantic range of ruach will inevitably impoverish its reading of the Old Testament's witness to the Spirit.
Merachepheth	The Hebrew Piel participle in Genesis 1:2 translated "moving," "hovering," or "brooding" to describe the Spirit of God's action over the primordial waters. The word appears elsewhere in the Old Testament only in Deuteronomy 32:11, where it describes an eagle hovering over its young. The image combines protective presence, creative anticipation, and the nurturing energy that precedes and enables the emergence of new life. The Spirit's merachepheth over the void is not passive observation but active creative engagement, the divine hover that signals and enables the ordered creation that follows.
Ex Nihilo	Latin: "out of nothing." The doctrine that God created the universe without any pre-existing material, He did not form the world from eternal matter but called all things into being from absolute non-existence. The doctrine of creation ex nihilo is implied throughout Genesis 1–2 and stated explicitly in Hebrews 11:3 ("what is seen was not made out of things which are visible") and 2 Maccabees 7:28. The Spirit's role in creation ex nihilo demonstrates His omnipotent divine power: to create from nothing requires unlimited creative power, which belongs to God alone.
Providence	The continuous, sovereign, Trinitarian act by which God sustains the universe in existence, governs all its events and processes, and directs all things toward His appointed ends. Providence is distinguished from creation (the original bringing of the universe into existence) as the ongoing maintenance and governance of what has been created. The Spirit's providential role includes the moment-by-moment sustaining of every creature's life (Psalm 104:29–30), the restraint of sin and chaos within the created order, and the directional governance of history toward the goal of the new creation.
Common Grace	The grace of God extended to all human beings regardless of election, the general goodness of God that sustains creaturely life, enables human flourishing, restrains the full expression of sin, and preserves the created

Term	Definition
	order for the purposes of special redemptive grace. Common grace is pneumatologically grounded: the Spirit of God, as the Creator-Spirit who made every human being and breathes life into every living creature, is the source of the capacities, reason, beauty, moral awareness, relational capacity, that enable human beings to flourish even in a fallen world. Common grace is distinct from saving grace but flows from the same divine generosity.
Nishmat Chayyim	Hebrew: “breath of life.” The phrase used in Genesis 2:7 to describe what God breathed into Adam’s nostrils to make him a living being. Nishmat chayyim is the animating ruach of God applied to the human creature specifically, the divine breath that crosses the infinite qualitative distance between matter and person, between dust and living soul. The creation of the human being is an irreducibly pneumatological act: without the Spirit-breath of God, the formed clay remains clay. With it, the formed clay becomes a person made in the image of God, capable of knowing and relating to his Creator.
Shekinah	A Hebrew term (from the verb shakan, to dwell) used in the Jewish tradition to designate the visible manifestation of God’s glorious presence, the glory-cloud that filled the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34–38) and the temple (1 Kings 8:10–11), and that accompanied Israel through the wilderness (Exodus 13:21–22). The shekinah is the most concentrated pneumatological symbol in the Old Testament: it is the visible form of the Spirit’s dwelling among His covenant people. Ezekiel’s vision of the shekinah departing from the temple (Ezekiel 10–11) is the most dramatic pneumatological judgment in the Old Testament.
Striving of the Spirit	The convicting, restraining, and life-giving presence of the Spirit within the antediluvian world described in Genesis 6:3 (“My Spirit shall not strive with man forever”). The Hebrew verb dīn (to judge, to plead, to contend) describes the Spirit’s active engagement with human beings, His inward pressure on the conscience that exposes sin, calls to righteousness, and warns of judgment. The Spirit’s striving corresponds to what John 16:8 calls His convicting work: “He will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.” The withdrawal of this striving is the most terrifying form of divine judgment: to be given over to one’s own sinful nature without the Spirit’s restraining and convicting presence.
Progressive Covenantal Fulfillment	The hermeneutical and theological framework for understanding the relationship between the Spirit’s Old Testament and New Testament ministries. Rather than representing a radical discontinuity (the Spirit absent in the Old and present in the New) or a simple continuity (the Spirit doing exactly the same thing in both), the framework of progressive covenantal fulfillment recognizes that the Spirit’s Old Covenant ministry was genuine but typologically anticipatory, calibrated to the redemptive-historical moment of the Old Covenant and pointing forward to the New Covenant’s

Term	Definition
	eschatological fulfillment at Pentecost. The same Spirit, the same divine Person, ministering with different scope, permanence, and redemptive-historical significance in each covenantal era.
Creatio Continua	Latin: “continual creation.” The theological concept that God’s creative and sustaining work is not completed in the original creation ex nihilo but continues moment by moment in the Spirit’s ongoing sustaining of every creature’s existence. Psalm 104:29–30 provides the primary scriptural basis: the creatures exist because the Spirit sends forth His ruach, and they cease to exist when He withdraws it. Creatio continua is distinguished from pantheism (which identifies God with the world) and deism (which separates God from the ongoing governance of the world) as the Reformed understanding of divine providence: God’s continuous, immanent, personal, Spirit-mediated sustaining of all creation.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: *What Must We Believe?*

We must believe that the Spirit is the Creator-Spirit, the divine Agent whose presence and activity undergird the existence of everything that exists. This conviction must fundamentally reshape how we think about the natural world, about human life, and about the relationship between creation and redemption. The created order is not a neutral backdrop against which the drama of redemption unfolds; it is a Spirit-pervaded order, brought into being by the Spirit's creative power, sustained in each moment by the Spirit's sustaining breath, and directed by the Spirit's sovereign governance toward the glory of God. The Christian who understands the Spirit's role in creation will see the natural world with different eyes: not as a merely natural system running on its own internal energy, but as a continuously created and continuously sustained gift of the Triune God, whose every moment of existence depends on the Spirit's life-giving presence.

We must also believe that the Spirit's Old Testament ministry is not a secondary or preparatory chapter in a story that really begins at Pentecost. The creation pneumatology of this lesson establishes that the Spirit's work is as ancient as creation itself, as comprehensive as the entire created order, and as continuous as the moment-by-moment sustaining of every living creature. To neglect the Spirit's Old Testament ministry is to impoverish our understanding of who He is and what He does; to engage it seriously is to discover that the New Testament's pneumatological richness is built on an Old Testament foundation that is itself inexhaustibly deep.

B. For the Heart: *What Must We Feel and Desire?*

The creation pneumatology of this lesson should produce a deep and pervasive sense of what the tradition called pneumatological wonder, the awe that arises from recognizing that the ordinary world in which we live is, in every moment and in every dimension, the Spirit's world. The breath you draw as you read these words is the Spirit's gift. The sun that rose this morning did so by the Spirit's sustaining governance of the natural order. The minds with which we study this lesson are gifts of the Spirit who made us and breathed life into us (Job 33:4). The beauty of the created world, the mountain, the ocean, the summer sky, is the beauty of the Spirit's creative handiwork, the visible face of the invisible God who made all things through His Word and His Spirit.

Let the teaching of Genesis 6:3 produce in you a genuine and ongoing sobriety about the Spirit's patience and its limits. The Spirit strives, He convicts, He restrains, He calls. But His striving has a season, and the season ends. The antediluvian world heard the message of Noah for a hundred and twenty years and refused the Spirit's striving. The door of the ark was shut. The lesson for every generation is the same: do not presume on the continued patience of the striving Spirit. Do not treat His ongoing conviction as evidence that there will always be time for response. "Todal, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts" (Psalm 95:7–8; Hebrews

3:7–8). The Spirit’s striving is grace; its cessation is judgment; and between the two is only the present moment of the gospel call.

C. For the Hands: *What Must We Do?*

- Read Genesis 1–2 in a single sitting with deliberate attention to every mention of the Spirit (ruach) or the breath/wind of God. Note where the Spirit appears, what He is doing, what effects His presence produces, and what the narrative implies about His role in the creative process. After reading, write one paragraph in your own words describing the picture of the Spirit that emerges from these two chapters. How does this picture compare to your pre-study understanding of the Spirit?
- Read Psalm 104 in its entirety as a meditation on the Spirit’s providential sustaining of the created order. As you read, attend to verses 29–30 as the pneumatological climax of the psalm. Identify as many specific created realities as possible in the psalm that the Spirit sustains: the mountains, the springs of water, the birds, the trees, the creatures of the sea, the seasons. Let the breadth of the Spirit’s providential scope produce in you a sense of the extraordinary comprehensiveness of His work. He is not merely the Spirit of the church; He is the Spirit of the cosmos.
- Meditate on the pneumatological implications of breathing. Every breath you draw is the Spirit’s gift, not figuratively but literally, in the sense that Job 33:4 intends (“The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life”). For one day, use your awareness of your own breathing as a pneumatological prompt: each time you become conscious of drawing breath, take a moment to acknowledge that the Spirit is the source of that breath, that your life is sustained in each moment by His creative and sustaining power, and that your dependence on Him is not a spiritual aspiration but a biological fact.
- Study the significance of Genesis 6:3 for the doctrine of divine patience and its limits. Read it alongside Genesis 7:16 (the closing of the ark’s door), Matthew 12:31–32 (the blasphemy against the Spirit), and Hebrews 3:7–4:11 (the warning against hardening the heart). What common pneumatological theme runs through these four texts? What is the pastoral implication for how you pray for the unconverted people in your life, with what urgency, with what understanding of the Spirit’s striving and its possible end?
- Survey the Spirit’s presence in the creation accounts of the broader Old Testament: Genesis 1:2; Job 26:13; 33:4; Psalm 33:6; 104:29–30; Isaiah 40:7; 42:5. Write down what each text contributes to the overall picture of the Spirit’s creative and providential work. What theme or pattern emerges from the survey? How does this Old Testament foundation reshape your understanding of the Spirit’s New Testament ministry?

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. Before studying this lesson, what was your working assumption about the Spirit's presence and activity in the Old Testament? Did you assume the Spirit was largely absent from the Old Testament and primarily a New Testament figure? Or did you have a sense of the Spirit's comprehensive Old Covenant ministry? What, if anything, in this lesson most surprised or corrected your previous understanding?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

2. Read Genesis 1:1–2:3 with special attention to the Spirit's role. Genesis 1:2 describes the Spirit of God as "moving over the surface of the waters." The Hebrew verb (*merachepeth*) is used of an eagle hovering over its young in Deuteronomy 32:11. What does this image of hovering or brooding convey about the Spirit's relationship to the primordial chaos? Is the Spirit's presence in Genesis 1:2 passive (simply present before creation begins) or active (preparing and enabling the creation that follows)? What does the Trinitarian structure of creation, the Father's speech, the Word, and the Spirit's hovering, teach us about how the one God creates?
3. Read Job 33:4 and Genesis 2:7 together. In Job 33:4, Elihu says "the Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life." In Genesis 2:7, God "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life." What is the relationship between the Spirit of God and the breath of the Almighty in these two texts? How does the creation of the human being in Genesis 2:7 demonstrate that the Spirit's work is not merely cosmological (creating the physical universe) but deeply personal (animating individual human beings with divine breath)?
4. Read Psalm 104:24–30 in its context. The psalm describes God's providential care for the entire created order: sea creatures, the leviathan, all living things that wait on God for their food. Verses 29–30 introduce the Spirit as the principle that accounts for the life-death-renewal cycle of the natural world. What is the structural logic of these two verses? What happens when the Spirit is withdrawn? What happens when He is sent forth? What does this tell us about the nature of creaturely existence, is it self-sustaining, or is it dependent on the Spirit's moment-by-moment gift?
5. Read Genesis 6:3 in its narrative context (Genesis 6:1–8). The Spirit has been striving with humanity, and a limit is announced: "My Spirit shall not strive with man forever." What does the context suggest about the nature of the Spirit's striving, what has He been doing, and what has humanity done in response? The Hebrew verb *dīn* can mean

to judge, to plead, or to contend. Which of these senses best fits the context? What is the significance of the hundred-and-twenty-year limit announced in the same verse?

6. Read Ezekiel 10:1–19 and 11:22–23, which describe the shekinah glory departing from the temple. What is the sequence of the departure? Where does the glory move to in each stage? What is the pneumatological significance of the glory’s departure, what does it mean that the Spirit’s dwelling presence leaves the temple? How does this pneumatological event relate to the physical destruction of the temple that follows in Ezekiel’s vision?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

7. The lesson argues that the semantic range of ruach (wind, breath, spirit) is “theologically purposive”, that the breadth of the word’s meaning reflects a theological conviction about the Spirit’s comprehensive presence in the created order. Do you find this argument persuasive? What would be lost in our understanding of the Spirit’s creation work if we always translated ruach as “spirit” and never as “breath” or “wind”? Conversely, what would be lost if we always translated it as “wind” and never as “spirit”?
8. The lesson draws an analogy between the Spirit’s role in the original creation (Genesis 1:2; Psalm 104:30) and His role in regeneration (John 3:5–8): both are creative acts of the Spirit bringing life from nothing. Is this analogy exegetically warranted, or is it a theological imposition on texts that have different referents? If it is warranted, what specifically does the creation analogy teach us about the nature of regeneration that we might otherwise miss?
9. The lesson distinguishes between the Spirit’s common grace (His life-sustaining, order-maintaining work among all human beings regardless of their spiritual state) and His saving grace (His regenerating, sanctifying work among God’s elect). How should the reality of common grace, the fact that the Spirit is present and active in the lives of unbelievers as the Creator-Spirit who made them and sustains them, affect how Christians relate to unbelievers? Does the doctrine of common grace give any basis for finding genuine human goods in non-Christian cultures, arts, or thought?
10. Genesis 6:3 announces that the Spirit’s striving will not continue forever. Matthew 12:31–32 teaches that blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Are these two texts describing the same phenomenon, or different ones? What is the relationship between the “striving” of Genesis 6:3 and the convicting work of the Spirit described in John 16:8? What are the pastoral implications of the doctrine that the Spirit’s striving has a limit?
11. The lesson argues that the correct framework for the relationship between the Spirit’s Old Testament and New Testament ministries is “progressive covenantal fulfillment” rather than either radical discontinuity or simple continuity. What does this framework add to our understanding that neither “radical discontinuity” nor “simple continuity”

provides? How does John 7:39 (“the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified”) fit within the progressive covenantal fulfillment framework?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

12. The lesson proposes using your awareness of your own breathing as a pneumatological prompt, a daily, moment-by-moment reminder of your dependence on the Spirit who gave you life and sustains it. Have you ever thought about breathing in this way? What would it do to your daily consciousness of the Spirit’s presence if you consistently practiced this pneumatological attentiveness? What other ordinary physical or natural experiences could serve as similar pneumatological prompts?
13. The lesson describes the natural world as a “Spirit-pervaded order” in which every created thing exists in continuous dependence on the Spirit’s sustaining breath. How does this pneumatological understanding of creation change the way you engage with the natural world, in worship, in environmental responsibility, in your appreciation of beauty? Is there a form of Christian piety that takes the Spirit’s creation work so seriously that it produces a richer engagement with the natural world rather than an exclusive focus on the redemptive-historical dimension of the Spirit’s ministry?
14. The lesson draws on the doctrine of the Spirit’s striving and its limits to encourage pastoral urgency in gospel witness. Apply this to your own context: who are the unconverted people in your life for whom you are praying and with whom you are sharing the gospel? How does the recognition that the Spirit’s striving has a season, that the door of the ark will eventually be shut, shape the urgency and the character of your witness to them?
15. Unit 2 of this series established who the Spirit is. Unit 3 now turns to what He does, beginning with creation and providence. How does the doctrine of the Spirit’s full deity (Lesson 4) enrich your understanding of His creation work (Lesson 6)? That is: knowing that the Spirit is the omnipotent, omniscient, eternal co-equal Third Person of the Holy Trinity, what does it add to your understanding of what it means that He hovered over the waters, breathed life into Adam, sustains every living creature, and strives with sinful humanity? How does the identity of the Agent transform your understanding of the act?

Prayer Focus

Open this lesson with a reading of Psalm 104 in its entirety, a practice that might require fifteen minutes if read slowly and meditatively, and that is worth every one of those minutes. Psalm 104 is one of the greatest creation psalms in the biblical canon: a sustained act of adoration before the Creator-God who has ordered all things, the mountains and the seas, the springs of water and the birds of the air, the moon and the sun, the creatures of the deep, by His wise and sovereign care. As you read, attend to the pneumatological climax of the psalm in verses 29–30, and let those two verses set the tone for the prayer time that follows. The Spirit sends forth the ruach and creation is renewed. The Spirit withdraws the ruach and creatures return to dust. Every breath is the Spirit's gift. Every moment of existence is the Spirit's act of sustaining grace.

Begin the prayer time with an extended period of creation adoration, not petition, not confession, not intercession, but simple, sustained praise to the Spirit as the Creator-Spirit whose presence underlies the existence of everything that exists. Thank Him for the gift of existence, that the world exists rather than nothing, that human beings exist rather than the void, that you personally exist rather than not. Thank Him for the sustaining of existence, that the world continues from moment to moment, that the sun rose this morning, that the creatures of the earth were created again (Psalm 104:30). Thank Him for the ordered beauty of the created world, for whatever expression of that beauty is available to the participants: a sunrise, a landscape, a human face, a mathematical proof. The Spirit's creative fingerprints are on all of it.

Move then to confession, guided by the pneumatological principle of Genesis 6:3. The Spirit strives, He convicts, He calls, He warns. Confess the specific ways in which the gathered community has resisted or suppressed the Spirit's striving: the moments of conviction ignored, the biblical warnings dismissed, the call to repentance deferred. Confess this not as an abstract moral failure but as the pneumatological offense it is, resistance to the striving Spirit of the living God, whose patience is real but whose patience is not infinite. Ask for the grace of a tender and responsive heart, a heart that hears the Spirit's striving with the attentiveness and the urgency that the character of the Striver demands.

Close with intercession for the unconverted, specific people whom the participants name and bring before God. Pray for them in explicitly pneumatological terms: that the Spirit would strive with them effectively, that the Spirit's conviction of sin and righteousness and judgment (John 16:8) would penetrate their defenses, that the Spirit's regenerating power would bring them from death to life, and that the same Spirit who hovered over the formless void and brought order and life from chaos would hover over the chaos of their spiritual condition and create in them a new heart and a new spirit. Pray with the urgency that comes from knowing that the Spirit's striving has a season, and with the confidence that comes from knowing that the One who strives is the omnipotent Creator-Spirit for whom nothing is impossible.

*“The Spirit of God has made me,
and the breath of the Almighty gives me life.”*

Job 33:4, NASB 1995

Key Texts: *Genesis 1:2; Genesis 2:7; Genesis 6:3; Job 33:4; Psalm 33:6; Psalm 104:29–30; Isaiah 40:7; Ezekiel 10:18–19; 11:22–23; John 7:37–39*

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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