

O Holy Spirit, Enter In

Where does God live? That might seem like an odd question. God doesn't have to be in one specific place in the same way we do. The Bible tells us that God is in every place, that is, with us wherever we go (Psalm 139:7–10). If we do picture God as “being” somewhere, we say that he is in heaven. It's strange to think of God living in a certain place on earth.

But if we were to ask an Old Testament Israelite where God lives, he could point to a specific place on earth. He'd likely say that God dwells in Jerusalem, in the temple. Before Jesus came, God taught his people to think of him as having a home with them, a special place where he lived on earth. That “home” was first an ornate tent called the tabernacle. Later, it was a permanent temple in Jerusalem. And in a very real way, God did live there. There was a “presence” or “glory” of God in the temple—sometimes in a way that could be seen or heard (2 Chronicles 7:1–2; Numbers 7:89). The temple was God's chosen way of dwelling with his people.

So where does God live today? Ephesians 2:19–22 gives a fascinating answer: God's people themselves “rise together to become a holy temple in the Lord... in which God lives by his Spirit.” Similarly, 1 Corinthians 6:19 says, “Your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit.” We no longer go to a physical temple in Jerusalem because God's temple is no longer a building—God lives directly in us by the Holy Spirit.

“O Holy Spirit, Enter In” doesn't specifically mention the temple, but the theme of God having a dwelling place in our hearts is the guiding idea behind the whole hymn. We're asking God to make his home in our hearts and to make our hearts a place that reflects his home there.

The hymn starts with a prayer that the Holy Spirit would enter into our hearts. We see a picture that is very similar to the Bible's description of God's glory entering and filling the temple when Solomon finished building it and dedicated it (2 Chronicles 7). God's glory shone and filled the temple as he “moved in.” In the hymn we're asking that the Spirit would “around and in us brightly shine.” We're asking God to move into our hearts and stay there permanently.

But when we think about what our hearts are like, the sin and the evil that dwells within them, we realize that our hearts are not worthy temples for God's Spirit. In fact, there are parts of our hearts that very much want to reject God's presence and push him out. As such, a major focus in this hymn is our need for the Holy Spirit to transform us—to make our hearts show his presence.

In three short stanzas, the hymn speaks to some of the many ways we need the Holy Spirit to transform us. It talks about effects on our relationship with God: We grow in faith, prayer, and faithfulness. It talks about the impact we have on other people: Our love increases, we serve our neighbors, and we live in Christian unity. It even mentions the Holy Spirit's work on our emotions: He creates "joy and gladness" in the works that God has done for us, and he "cheers us" by his teaching.

To put it simply, the Holy Spirit works to change *every* part of us. And the hymn uses another picture of God's presence to show how the Spirit will do that: fire. Fire is often used in the Bible to talk about God's presence—he spoke to Moses from a burning bush, and he led his people in a pillar of fire (Exodus 3:4, 13:21). But the way the hymn uses the concept of fire in stanzas 2 and 3 is different. It is more like what two of Jesus' disciples said about how they felt when Jesus spoke to them: "Were not our hearts burning within us?" (Luke 24:32). When they heard the truth that Jesus was telling them, their hearts were filled with the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit prepares to make his home in our hearts when we hear God's Word. This is similar to the way the Lord our God prepared his "home" in the Old Testament. Before the tabernacle or temple were built, the LORD directed the people how to build it into what he intended. The outward glory of the building testified to the glory of the LORD who lived in it. The inside was made into a place that was holy and wholly dedicated to the LORD. The Spirit uses the Word to teach us to be temples that worship God, too. On the outside, he makes us into "faithful witnesses" who show God's glory. Inwardly, he causes us to grow in love and faith, purifying us as a place where he lives. And, at the end of our lives, he will bring us to see "our Savior's blessing" in heaven, where we will dwell with God, and he will dwell with us—forever.

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"O Holy Spirit, Enter In" was published in 1640 by Michael Schirmer (1607–1673). Originally from Leipzig, Germany, he became a rector at the Grey Cloister Gymnasium in Berlin, an important high school founded during the Reformation. While serving there for over thirty years, Schirmer lost his wife and dealt with extended periods of depression. He loved poetry and published several hymns, though this is the only one that has been translated into English.