



Lesson 21

HOLY SPIRIT GIFTS

Reading Acts 8

Jesus promised his disciples that they would be given the Holy Spirit.

He said to them:

"These signs shall follow them that believe. In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover" (Mark 16:17,18).

The disciples had been promised that they would be given the Holy Spirit with special powers to help them in their work. They had been told not to leave Jerusalem, but to *"wait for the promise of the Father"* (Acts 1:4). So they waited as they had been told.

We have already seen how one day (it was the day of Pentecost), when they were all together, a wonderful thing happened. The house where they were was shaken, and there was a sound *"as of a rushing mighty wind"*.

"And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2:4).

Why were special gifts of the spirit given to the disciples?

They proved that the message of the disciples was from God

Jesus had been crucified; God had raised him from the dead. He had gone into heaven, leaving his little band of disciples to *"Go... into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature"* (Mark 16:15).

It was a big task. Would people listen to them? Surely they would never believe the story of a man brought back to life after being dead three days. The New Testament was not yet written.

So the disciples were given the power to work miracles and speak in tongues as a sign that their message was from God.

On that day of Pentecost, they went out immediately and preached to the Jews in languages which the Apostles had never learnt, and could not have spoken but for the power of God. No wonder it says of the people who heard them:

"They were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galileans? And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born?" (Acts 2:7, 8)

There were people of many different nationalities there in Jerusalem on that day. They had come to keep the feast of Pentecost.

The Spirit Gifts helped to guide the church

As a result-of the preaching on the day of Pentecost, about 3,000 men and women joined the disciples, and became Christians (Acts 2:41).

And so the Christian church had made a good start.

But imagine the difficulties there would be. Such a big family of Christians would need someone to guide and teach them, and to give them advice about the arrangements they would have to make for worship. They could not learn from the New Testament, because it was not yet written.

So the gifts of the Spirit were sent, not only to convince outsiders of the truth of the apostles' message, but also to help and teach the early Christians, and to set the first churches in order.

What were these gifts?

We have already seen that the apostles could speak in languages that they had never learnt. They could also heal the sick.

In 1 Corinthians 12:4-22 the apostle Paul shows how different members of the church possessed different gifts, and how each member was to work for the good of the others.

Then in verses 28-29 he gives a list of the gifts:

"And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues."

God's gifts cannot be bought

The disciples immediately, having received the gift of the Holy Spirit, set about the work of preaching. A follower of Jesus, called Philip, went down to Samaria and began to teach the people there. Many who listened to him believed his words about Jesus and the coming Kingdom of God, and they were baptized.

Among those baptized was a man called 'Simon the Sorcerer'. He was a wonder-worker who had deceived the people of Samaria for a long time by his clever tricks.

When the apostles at Jerusalem heard about the new converts in Samaria, they sent Peter and John to help with the work.

Now Peter and John, being apostles, were able to give to others the powers of the Holy Spirit by laying their hands on them. (This was something only the first apostles could do.)

Simon, looking on, saw these two men laying their hands on the 'new' disciples, passing on to them the Holy Spirit. He was amazed. He probably thought to himself: "What wealth and power could have, if could pass on this gift..."

So he actually offered to buy the gift from Peter.

This was a terrible thing to do! No wonder Peter said to him:

"Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thy heart may be forgiven thee. For I perceive that thou art in the gall of *bitterness*, and in the bond of *iniquity*" (Acts 8:21-23).

Then Simon was afraid and asked Peter to pray for him. We are not told what happened after this. The story shows us the early disciples using the powers of the Holy Spirit when they preached to the people about Jesus and the Kingdom.

Read Acts 8:15-25 and note the following points:

1. Verse 18 says that it was through the laying on of the Apostles' hands that the
2. Holy Spirit was given.
3. Simon did not receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit when he was baptized;
4. The Apostles Peter and John gave these newly baptized believers the Holy Spirit
5. gifts after they had prayed and laid hands on them (this was a way of blessing).
6. Even after Simon had received the Holy Spirit in this way he could not pass it on
7. to others. This is what he wanted so badly.
8. This shows that it was only the Apostles who passed on the gifts of the Holy Spirit. When they died the gifts could no longer be passed on and would disappear with that generation of people.

The end of the gifts

We have already seen that in the days of the first Christians there was no New Testament - it had not yet been written; and we have suggested that is one reason why these gifts were so necessary.

Today, we can read about the life of the Lord Jesus, and we can read the letters that the apostles wrote to the churches of their day. But **they** had no written record, so that apostles, prophets and teachers with special powers from God were a very necessary help to the first churches.

When the writing of the New Testament was finished, there was no longer any need for this special help from God. All that Christians need to know is written down for them in the Bible. So the Spirit gifts were taken away.

The apostle Paul said this would happen. In 1 Corinthians 13:8 we read:

"Charity (love) never faileth: but whether there be prophecies (that is, the gift of prophesying), they shall fail (or be done away); whether there 'be tongues (that is, the gift of being able to speak in tongues), they shall cease; whether there be knowledge (the gift of knowledge), it shall vanish away."

It would seem that the gifts were not suddenly taken away, at the exact time, when the New Testament was finished: but that as time went on, those who possessed these gifts died, and they were not passed on to the Christians who followed them.

Does anyone possess these gifts today?

Some people do claim to have the gifts of the spirit. In particular they claim to be able to speak in tongues, and to heal the sick. How can we test those that claim to work miracles by the Spirit of God?

1. We remind ourselves that the apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13, that a time would come when the spirit gifts would cease. When did this time come, if not soon after the New Testament was completed?

It cannot be with the coming of the Kingdom, because there will be more gifts than ever then. (The Holy Spirit gifts are, in fact, called "*powers of the world to come*" (Hebrews 6:5), and the early disciples had the 'firstfruits' of these gifts which will be freely given in the Kingdom.)

2. We note that the Holy Spirit gifts were given to help the true church. The true church believes and preaches the Word of God. Most of those who claim to have these powers today, if not all, preach things not taught in the Word of God. We must, therefore, reject their claims.

3. We have to confess that we are not impressed by many of the so-called miracles. Many of the cures are soon seen to be no cures at all; others can be explained scientifically. Hypnotists can often get the same results. None of them can raise the dead.

God can, and still does, work through His Spirit today, but **He does not allow people to use His Spirit**. Those who believe all that is written in the Bible will not claim to have the Spirit gifts. They know that these gifts were to vanish away soon after the writings of the New Testament were complete.

God is still working

We no longer have the power to work miracles and speak with tongues. God's Holy Spirit is still at work today as, for example, when God answers prayers; and God also still speaks to us through His Word. When we read the Bible, the spirit of God is in a very real sense, teaching us.

If we want to please God, then, let us show that we appreciate all that He has done for us by reading His Word, and learning all we can from it.

Summary

1. Holy Spirit gifts were given to the early Christians.
2. They were for three purposes:
 - a. To complete the New Testament;
 - b. To be a sign to unbelievers;
 - c. To help to build up the early church;
3. They were only given *until* the New Testament writings were finished; after this they were to 'vanish away'.
4. No-one since has been able to work miracles by the power of the Holy Spirit. those men who claim to work miracles today may possess some strange ability, just as hypnotists do. But it is not the power of the Holy Spirit.

Chapters to read

1 Corinthians 13 and 14

Learn by heart

1 Corinthians 13:8

“Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.”