



THE GIFT OF THE SPIRIT

Acts 18:18-19:10

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This is the first in a series of messages looking at St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians, a church remarkably similar to the Church of the Resurrection. The church in Ephesus was situated in one of the most cosmopolitan and important cities of the ancient world (in modern Turkey), a city teeming with people and businesses, enormous buildings, and a variety of competing ideas and religions. Like Resurrection, the Ephesian church celebrated its eleventh birthday around the time Paul wrote his letter to them.

Rather than begin this series in Ephesians 1:1, we're starting off with three messages from Acts 18-20, detailing the historical account of how the church in Ephesus began. This first message is about the gift of the Holy Spirit to begin the church in Ephesus—an appropriate theme for Pentecost. In this message, we'll consider several questions related to the gift of the Spirit.

WHAT IS THE GIFT OF THE SPIRIT?

What's Pentecost all about? The gift of the Spirit **is the presence and power of Jesus in us, to usher in his kingdom all around us.** Think back to the days preceding the first Pentecost, as Luke describes in Acts 1. After Jesus rose from the dead, he visited with hundreds of people over forty days, and then he ascended to the right hand of his Father. Right before he ascended, he told his disciples to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the gift of the Spirit, because:

... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” (Acts 1:8 ESV)

The gift of the Spirit, according to Jesus, was the promise of power. Specifically, Jesus promised to empower his disciples to represent him in three ever-widening concentric circles: Jerusalem city, modern Palestine (i.e. Judea and Samaria), and around the world.

What's really striking about those days prior to Pentecost is how little the disciples understood Jesus' promise. It seems that Jesus' plan to use them as his ambassadors really caught the disciples off guard. Look at how the conversation began that day, before Jesus ascended to his Father.

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6 ESV)

It appears that the disciples knew Jesus' resurrection was hugely important for national politics, but they couldn't conceive the consequences for themselves as individuals. Think about all the speculation before an election in our country. People wonder about what may change with the new administration, but hardly anyone anticipates receiving a call from the new president to join his or her new staff. Jesus, on the other hand, was busy in the days between Easter and the Ascension drafting his disciples into his service in God's new kingdom.

Jesus' disciples were surprised to discover that the political had suddenly become very personal. Let's imagine, by way of the following illustration, how it must have felt in those days as Jesus called them into his service.

The Washington Redskins are a lot like Israel at the time of Jesus. Israel was once a great empire, but those days were long forgotten. Likewise, the Redskins have had an abysmal record since Coach Gibbs' empire in the 1980s. They've had only six winning seasons in the past twenty years. So you can imagine the messianic frenzy in 2012 when the Redskins drafted Heisman trophy winner Robert Griffin III ("RG3") to be their new star quarterback. Redskins fans everywhere were asking, "Is this the year RG3 will restore the kingdom to Washington?"

But alas, it wasn't meant to be. RG3 was oppressed and afflicted, wounded and crushed, his right knee like a sheep for the slaughter. The past two seasons have been the worst in Redskins history.

To understand how the disciples must have felt on Pentecost, imagine RG3 calling us to a gathering. We ask, "RG3, is *now* the time?" He says, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that Dan Snyder has fixed by his own authority. Don't worry about *when*. Focus on *how*. In ten days we'll face the Cowboys in the Super Bowl. I'm leaving, but it's okay, because I've drafted you onto the team instead. Trust me, you'll do fine. Just suit up and be ready. On game day, I'll give you the power you need."

Think about how terrifying and humiliating it would be for our lot to face off against an NFL team. I'd like to be up in the bleachers, about to watch the Super Bowl, rather than down on the field, about to be crushed to death.

Here's the point: what Jesus has called us to do is an even more impossible, enormous task. He won't allow us to sit in the bleachers and watch the professionals do the work. The King has called *us* to usher in his kingdom in places like Ephesus and Washington, where there are a lot of other people and institutions who believe that they—not Jesus—are in charge. The city of man is a place of tension and greed, rancor and division, poverty and exploitation. *We* can't transform it into the city of God. We can't transform our city into a place of peace, love, justice and unity under King Jesus. Only Jesus can do that. So we need the presence and power of Jesus in us, in order to usher in his kingdom all around us. That's what the gift of the Spirit is all about.

What happened to the disciples on that first Pentecost is absolutely miraculous. Remember how they ducked for cover and ran when Jesus was arrested? Remember Peter's three denials the evening before Jesus was crucified all alone? But what a difference Pentecost made among them. Peter found his courage, and became willing to risk shame and scandal, arrest and torture in order to spread the good news of Jesus' kingdom.

What happened to Peter and the other disciples? What made the difference in their lives? Luke tells us (Acts 2) that they were filled with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Then all through the book of Acts, the Spirit empowered them to do what King Jesus had commissioned them to do. E.g. Acts 4:8. “Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to the Jerusalem Council...” E.g. Acts 13:9. “Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to the Cypriot proconsul...” etc.

The first disciples were simple people like you and me. On Pentecost, Jesus kept his promise and gave them his presence and his power to be his ambassadors to the world.¹

HOW SHOULD WE USE THE GIFT OF THE SPIRIT?

We’ve seen that the gift of the Spirit is the presence and power of Jesus in us to usher in his kingdom all around us. Now let’s begin to consider how we should use the gift of the Spirit.²

We use the gift of the Spirit **to see and to show (i.e. to comprehend and communicate) God’s story**. Luke shows us how in his account of the founding of the church in Ephesus (Acts 18:18-19:10).

On the tail end of Paul’s second missionary journey, he briefly passed through Ephesus with his disciples Priscilla and Aquila (18:18). While there (18:19), he began talking with people at the synagogue who asked him to stay longer. Paul declined because he needed to get back home, but he left Priscilla and Aquila there and promised to return, God willing (18:21). That promise formed the basis for Paul’s 3rd missionary journey the next year, which would bring him back to Ephesus for about two and a half years.

In the meantime, Apollos came to Ephesus (18:24). Apollos was pretty impressive. He was a messianic Jew, well-educated in the Old Testament and in rhetoric. But as he began teaching in the synagogue, it became evident that he didn’t know the whole story about Jesus. He could only take it as far as John the Baptist. If we summarize the story of the Bible in terms of four chapters—Creation, Fall, Redemption, Consummation—Apollos knew all about chapters 1 & 2, but was fuzzy on chapters 3 & 4. In other words, he knew about humanity’s rebellion against God, and the importance of turning back to God in repentance, but how Jesus figured into the story wasn’t entirely clear. In other words, he knew the Old Testament, but he didn’t know the New Testament story of Jesus’ fulfillment and completion of it.

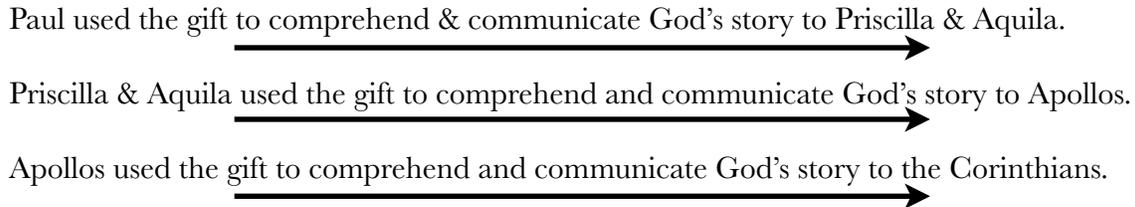
Thankfully, Priscilla and Aquila were there in Ephesus, and they had the gift of the Holy Spirit. Watch how they used this gift to help Apollos.

¹ Compare the 12 Apostles after Pentecost to the 12 Tribes of Israel after the report of the Hebrew spies who visited the Promised Land (Numbers 13:25-33). The Israelites turned back in fear, but the Apostles pressed forward in the power of the Holy Spirit.

² We can only “begin to consider” how to use the gift of the Spirit here. The Holy Spirit is a gift Christians never stop learning about. As we’ll see in subsequent messages, Paul’s entire letter to the Ephesians is about how to use the gift of the Spirit in order to be a Spirit-filled church.

Priscilla and Aquila didn't call Apollos out to embarrass him before the crowd. Instead, "they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately" (18:26). When Apollos then went over to visit the Corinthians—presumably in the power of the Spirit—he was able to teach them from the Old Testament that Jesus was its fulfillment. Apollos was "showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus" (18:28).

In other words, what happened was a kind of chain reaction, as the power of the Spirit moved from one person to the next:



See and show. See and show. On and on the chain reaction continues, all the way up to this very day, as Christians use the gift of the Spirit.

Meanwhile, back in Ephesus, Paul kept his promise and returned the next year to find the Ephesians right where Apollos had left them. Paul asked them:

"Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they said, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." [3] And (Paul) said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They said, "Into John's baptism." (Acts 19:2-3 ESV)

Apollos had left the Ephesians knowing only half of God's story, chapters 1 and 2, Creation and Fall. They were still fuzzy on chapters 3 & 4, Redemption and Consummation. So Paul said:

"John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus." (Acts 19:4 ESV).

Then Paul baptized them in Jesus' name, laid hands on them and prayed for them, and they were filled with the Holy Spirit. In response, they all began to proclaim God's redemption story in other languages, just like on the first Pentecost in Jerusalem some twenty years earlier. The chain reaction continued as the Ephesians began to comprehend and communicate God's Story. The Good News spread so far and so quickly that by the time Paul left Ephesus two and a half years later, Luke was able to say that "everyone" in the Province of Asia Minor had heard God's story (19:10).³

³ Paul's missionary strategy was to focus on strategic global cities like Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome, and then trust that the Holy Spirit would spark a chain reaction of Gospel expansion throughout the surrounding regions. To get a sense for how the Good News of the Gospel might have captured the imaginations of an entire community, take a look at the story of the Mouk Tribe in Papua New Guinea in this (old but still great) video released by New Tribes Mission: <https://youtu.be/tYuRaliPM8U>. Make sure to watch it to the very end.

What are we to make of the Ephesians speaking in other tongues after receiving the gift of the Spirit? Luke doesn't report this phenomenon with every conversion in Acts. Rather, it happens three times through the story:

1. The first instance is the original Pentecost in Jerusalem under Peter's leadership in Acts 2.
2. The second instance is when Peter shared the Gospel with Gentiles in Caesarea Maritima in Acts 10.
3. The third and final occurrence is here in Ephesus under Paul's leadership in Acts 19.

Here's what I think is happening. Remember Jesus' Ascension promise (in Acts 1:8) of the gift of the Spirit to empower kingdom expansion in three concentric missionary frontiers? He said:

... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8 ESV)

The locations for the three episodes involving speaking in other tongues corresponds with the three missionary frontiers Jesus described in Acts 1:8: Jerusalem, then Caesarea Maritima (in modern Palestine, i.e. "Judea and Samaria"), and finally this third account in Ephesus (i.e. "the end of the earth" from the perspective of a Jerusalemite). Anyone reading Acts in the first or second century would have recognized all three of these places as global cities, provincial commercial centers, in which people from a great many tribes and tongues would be gathered, and translators would be essential. The gift of the Spirit was making such translation easy.

Unfortunately, we've seen too much television to be able to think accurately about what these moments must have been like. The modern theatrical versions would no doubt be like the Tower of Babel: utter chaos, with wild-eyed converts shaking and convulsing and shouting gibberish at people in the marketplaces. Instead, we ought to imagine them as the undoing of Babel: people who might once have been xenophobic, afraid to reach out and make contact with foreigners, suddenly having the confidence to befriend them and strike up conversations with them in their own languages. That's what was happening, through the gift of the Spirit.

London's east side is said to have some of the greatest ethnic diversity of any place in the western world. Imagine finding yourself there, surrounded by people of every color, nationality, language and appearance. Think what would it be like if suddenly you had the courage and ability to walk up to anyone there and talk with them as if you'd grown up on the same street together all your lives. The same thing happened on the first Pentecost in Jerusalem when the church was born there. It happened again as the Gospel spread to Gentiles in Judea and Samaria (Acts 10). And now, in Acts 19, it happened a third time at the "ends of the earth" with the birth of the church in Ephesus. In all of this, Luke is showing us how the early Christians used the gift of the Spirit to comprehend and communicate God's Story.

Seeing and showing God's story, by the way, is simply another way to describe comprehending and communicating the story of the Bible, God's Holy Word. What Priscilla and Aquila filled in for Apollos, what Paul filled in for the Ephesians, was in complete harmony with what would later be recorded in the New Testament. We use the gift of the Spirit to comprehend and communicate God's story as it is recorded in the Scriptures.

“One of the great lessons of the East African Revival was that a genuine movement of the Spirit will impress on our hearts that the Scriptures really are the inspired and authoritative Word of God. We cannot separate the Spirit from the Spirit-inspired Scriptures.” (Eliud Wabukala, Archbishop of the Church of Kenya)

Want to know if you’ve been converted? Want to know if you’re filled with the Spirit? Then consider whether you’re drawn to God’s story as it is found in the Scriptures. The gift of the Spirit empowers us to comprehend and communicate, to see and to show, God’s Story as it is revealed in God’s Word.

HOW DO WE GET THE GIFT OF THE SPIRIT?

The gift of the Spirit is the presence and power of Jesus in us to usher in his kingdom all around us. We use the gift of the Spirit to see and to show God’s story. But how do we get this gift? Luke tells us that the Ephesians received the Spirit when Paul laid hands on them. How do we get this gift without Paul here to pray for us?

On the first Pentecost (Acts 2), Peter boldly preached a marvelous sermon proclaiming God’s story of Creation, Fall, Redemption and Consummation. For Peter, the turning point of the story was the death and resurrection of Jesus, who was crucified for our sins, and whom God raised from the dead and enthroned as the ruler of his kingdom. When the people of Jerusalem heard the sermon, they asked, “What shall we do?”

Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For this promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” Acts 2:38-39

Roughly 3,000 people were baptized that day and received the gift of the Spirit.

Ever since then, people all over the world have believed and been baptized in Jesus’ name, and received the gift of the Spirit. If you haven’t yet done so, isn’t it time for you to receive this gift? , The Holy Spirit isn’t a gift that Jesus wants to hold back from you. After all, his plans for us aren’t easy. He’s calling us to make him King in our own lives, and to usher in his kingdom all around us, among people who don’t want a new king. Jesus doesn’t want you to fail, and that’s why he’s so eager to give you the gift of his Spirit. Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

For those who have received this gift, you know how easy it can be to become distracted and discouraged. We can be filled up with the Spirit, but we also can leak. In our fear and anxiety, we don’t trust God, so we wrestle him for control. Then, once we have the reins, we become even more anxious and afraid because being in control makes us nervous. It’s a vicious cycle, requiring repentance and a renewed trust in the Lord. Follow along with us in Ephesians this summer, as we learn how to repent and be re-filled with the Holy Spirit.

Nevertheless, in spite of our many failings, let's not overlook the enormous difference the Spirit makes in our church. We should be a family of cowards and misfits, rebels and addicts, but instead we are a people who see and show God's story in our lives here in Washington. Think of those in our congregation who have refused to go with the flow at work or school, because the Spirit has given them the courage to do so. Think of all those in our church who practice chastity as singles, or fidelity within marriage, in spite of enormous pressures day in and day out. Think of all those who have rough family situations, or really serious health concerns, and by God's grace and power they aren't drinking themselves to sleep every night, but instead are turning to God and trusting him to fill them with his Holy Spirit. Thank God for the gift of Pentecost, the gift of the Holy Spirit, empowering us to usher in God's kingdom all around us.

Of all the callings we have been given as a church, one of the most risky and difficult and time-consuming is that of raising children. It's more terrifying than facing off against the Cowboys in the Super Bowl! Everyone involved in raising children needs the gift of the Spirit for this critically important work. Parents and caregivers need the Spirit, in order to see and show God's story to the kids. Likewise, children need the Spirit, so that they might never know a day apart from their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. That's why, thanks be to God, the gift of Pentecost isn't just for parents. Remember what Peter said? "The promise is for you and your children..." And so, almost 2,000 years later, we continue the Pentecost tradition of offering the sacrament of baptism to the children of believing parents. See and show. See and show. The chain reaction continues, as the Gospel continues to spread to the ends of the earth.