



You Have a Gift! Promise Fulfilled

Acts 2:1-22

September 11, 2005

PROMISES MADE

Do you remember the story I told you about my dad, the one about the day he took my sister and me to town? Dad had some errands to do, and if we would go with him, he promised he would get us some ice cream. So we rode into Raleigh, to the bank to make a deposit, to Pep Boys to test the vacuum tubes from the TV set (yes, it was that long ago), and then he drove us ... home. Something perverse in me made me wait until we were pulling into the driveway before I whined, "But Daddy, you promised: ice cream!" His eyes got big, and he looked at us, and he backed up the car and drove all the way back into town. I learned that day that my dad was a man who kept his promises.

Some promises take a few hours. Some promises take a few centuries. Many centuries ago, the prophet Joel made a promise from God. His nation had just suffered a natural catastrophe, a massive plague of locusts that stripped the earth bare of every green thing. Joel told his people, "You think this is bad, just wait until the day of the Lord and his judgment." But in the midst of disaster and judgment, Joel added a promise from the Lord. Here is the promise:

I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
Your old men shall dream dreams,
And your young men shall see visions.
Even on the male and female slaves,
In those days, I will pour out my spirit.
Joel 2:28-29

"I will pour out my spirit on all flesh..." In other words, someday, all people will be immersed in the presence of God. God will pour out his presence on not just kings and priests and prophets, but all people -- men and women, young and old, free and slave. God will be right there with everybody, and the experience of God will be so overpowering that it will move men and women too to proclaim it to everyone. That was the promise of God through Joel. But, time passed. Centuries passed.

Then one day another prophet appeared, in the wilderness. It was John the Baptist, who echoed the promise, in this way:

I will baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. (Luke 3:16)

John repeated the old promise: someone is coming who will baptize us with the Holy Spirit and immerse us with the presence of God.

And then someone did come, Jesus of Nazareth. To be with Jesus was to be surrounded with the presence of Almighty God. After Jesus' ministry and his crucifixion and his resurrection were accomplished, and just before he ascended to the Father, Jesus gave his final instructions to his students, and repeated the old promise of the Holy Spirit:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses... (Acts 1:8)

PROMISES KEPT

And then, a few weeks later, the promise came true. Here's how it happened: (read Acts 2:1-21)

And so the great promise of God, promised since the prophet Joel, had finally come true. And God has been keeping that promise ever since to every one who follows God's Son. Just as Jesus acted through the guidance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit, so can you. Just as God's Holy Spirit led the first disciples through Pentecost and those early struggling days of the church, so you will be led and strengthened, too. Whatever storm has washed over you, God will keep the promise, and immerse you with God's personal presence, which will strengthen you, which will guide you.

Remember Lieutenant Dan in the movie "Forrest Gump?" His personal disaster had been Vietnam, where he had lost his legs. Back in the States, Lieutenant Dan reeked with booze and anger at God and everybody else around him. He taunted Forrest for Forrest's own faith.

But do you remember that day Forrest was working his shrimp boat in the Gulf, and Lieutenant Dan showed up? And then, a hurricane showed up and caught them in their boat on the Gulf. Legless Lieutenant Dan lashed himself to the crow's nest, and spent the night cussing God out and daring God to kill him. But the morning came, and they were still alive, and Lieutenant Dan had made his peace with God. He pushed himself off the boat and swam in the calmed waters. It was his baptism. This man who had railed against the absence of God now was immersed in the presence of God.

For anyone who seethes with anger at the absence of God, know that God does keep his promises. The whole reason the church is here is because God keeps his promise: all who follow his Son are immersed in the presence of God. We are empowered by the guidance of God. We are empowered by the spiritual powers of God, called the gifts of the Spirit.

GIFTS GIVEN

One particular gift of the Spirit that God gave the believers on the day of Pentecost was the gift of tongues. Not tongues as in *glossolalia*, which no one understands but maybe a spiritual interpreter. But tongues as in *xenolalia*, which is a fancy way of saying they received the gift of speaking to foreign people in their own languages.

This spring Candy and I went to Spain to see our daughter Whitney who was studying there for the semester. She met us at the train station and took us to a hotel. And there Whitney walked right up to the desk and spoke to the staff, *in Spanish, like a native*. My jaw dropped. I'd never heard her do that. It was like a miracle. It was also a miracle in that this was a girl who once was so shy she could not bear to make her own order at McDonald's on Ward Boulevard. But here she was talking to *strangers* in another country, *in Spanish*.

C. S. Lewis once defined a miracle as a natural process that God accelerates to an unnatural speed. That was what happened on Pentecost when God gave the disciples the ability to learn in an instant how to speak with all the curiosity seekers in whatever their mother tongue was. And this too was a double miracle, for these were the same disciples who had been too scared to say anything up to this point. Remember Peter? He'd had his chance to speak out when Jesus had been captured and a woman said to him "Aren't you one of his followers?" But he didn't then.

But he does now. On Pentecost the whole church came out of hiding, and Peter stood up before everybody and found his voice. That's what the Holy Spirit does when it pours over the church. The church receives God's gift of power to come out of hiding and to find its voice. "The Spirit is the power which enables to church to 'go public' with its good news to attract a crowd, ...to have something to say worth hearing" (*Will Willimon, Anchor Commentary on Acts, p. 33*)

Have you ever been with someone who was in emotional and spiritual pain, who was searching desperately for God, and you knew it was the perfect time for YOU to say something, but you kept quiet? The next time that happens, all you need to do is to trust the promise of the Father who keeps his every promise, including the promise to give you the gift of God's presence and power right with you, so you can come out of hiding, and find your tongue.

Many of the gifts of God's Holy Spirit are gifts related to expression and proclamation. There is the gift of apostleship, the gift of prophecy, the gift of evangelism, the gifts of pastoring and teaching and encouraging. And there are the gifts of knowledge and wisdom. All of them in one way or another involve being able to let God speak through you the right word at the right time. To be able to do that for God's sake and thus bring people closer to God is much, much more than having the gift of gab. It is a spiritual gift, a divine power for words that God has placed in some of us.

But this is about more than just any words. It is about words with knowledge and wisdom. The Spirit of God has the power to elevate our ability to reason and to speak. The Spirit gives power first to think about God in fresh and inspired ways, and then to share those bold and extraordinary insights.

What is a prophet but someone who has the gift to set aside conjecture and guesswork and replace them “with the true knowledge of a divinely inspired intellect?” (Robert Wall, *New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary of Acts*, p. 55) What is a teacher but someone who has the gift to interpret the Word after the mind of God?

So Peter stood up before God and everybody and found his voice, and said, “...all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say.” That word “listen” captures what I’ve been talking about here. The literal translation of the Greek verb there, *enotizomai*, means “*let me place it into your ears*”!! What a great expression. Some speakers you have to strain to understand. You go home shaking your head and wondering, “What did he say?” But some speakers have such a gift from God that it is like they are placing the Word right in your ears, and in your mind, and in your heart.

GIFTS DISCOVERED

Now, how do you know if you God has given you a gift like that?

Study

You can actually study spiritual gifts in the Bible. In the letters of Paul there are four listings of examples of spiritual gifts. You can read those passages, and by looking at their contexts, get the gist of what those gifts look like. More than that, you can study the book by Karen Brown that some of our classes are using. That book has a handy definition of each gift listed in scripture. (If you’re not in one of those classes, I’ll bet that if you ask Tom Riley, he’ll slip you a book.)

Search

Once you have studied examples of spiritual gifts, you can begin to look at yourself to see what gifts God has placed in you. In the study book is an inventory you can fill out and get an idea.

Listen to Friends

Sometimes when a lady gets dressed, she will ask a trusted friend: “Is my slip showing?” In the same way, you can ask a friend, “Is my gift showing?” Trusted friends in Christ have the perspective you don’t have to point out to you gifts that you might not be able to see. I’ll never forget the day a minister named Mel Williams looked me in the eyes and told me, “I see you as ... a pastor.”

Listen to God

There are some things God sees that you probably don't see either. The only way to discover them is to spend uninterrupted, unhurried time with God. We call that prayer. That is where we ask God to free us to hear the voice of God's Holy Spirit speaking within us.

Listen to Yourself

Listen to the things you gripe about. What makes you angry might be God's sign in you about what you have been given a divine passion to fight against. Listen to the things that give you joy. What gives you joy might be God's sign about what you have a divine passion to work for.

Listen to yourself, and to the Scriptures, and friends, and God's Holy Spirit. You may be surprised by gifts you didn't know you had but were plainly visible to God and everybody else.

But now, if you have an inkling that God has given you some gift, for example a gift with words, what do you do now? It's time to open it!

GIFTS OPENED AND EMPLOYED

If God given you one of these verbal gifts, like prophecy or teaching or encouraging, you have a responsibility to unwrap that gift and use it. Why, when you receive a gift from anyone, it is rude not to open it! So if God has given you one of these verbal gifts, you have a responsibility to come out of hiding, and find your voice. Unwrap the gift, and use it: use it for God, use it for the church, use it for humanity. It's no time to wait. It's time for mission. It's time to place the good news about the grace of the Lord right into other people's ears, so that others will know to call upon that Lord, so that everybody who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

-- Douglas E. Murray

NEXT SUNDAY

Non-verbal gifts of deed: assisting, giving, leadership, compassion, faith

