

The Gift of Tongues (Part 1)

by Chuck Smith

Chuck Smith explores the gift of tongues, its biblical foundations, and its significance in the believer's prayer and worship life.

Scripture: Isaiah 28:11, Mark 16:15

Topics: "The Holy Spirit", "The Gift of Tongues"

Description

Chuck Smith discusses the gift of speaking in tongues, emphasizing its controversial nature and its unique presence in the New Testament compared to the Old Testament. He references Isaiah's prophecy about tongues and connects it to the fulfillment seen in Acts during Pentecost, where the Holy Spirit enabled believers to speak in various languages. Smith explains the purpose of tongues, including aiding prayer, worship, and personal edification, while also addressing the misconceptions surrounding its significance as a sign of the Holy Spirit's baptism. He concludes by encouraging believers to seek the fullness of the Spirit and the gifts He provides.

Transcript

In this lesson we come to the gift of speaking in tongues. And of all of the gifts and manifestations of the Holy Spirit, this is by far the most controversial. Theological debates really heat up when you get the subject of speaking in tongues. It seems as though, of all of the gifts of the Spirit, this is the only one that was not manifested in the Old Testament. The rest of the gifts of the Spirit are found manifested in the Old Testament. This one seems to be limited to the New Testament.

There is one possibility of this gift being manifested in the Old Testament and that is concerning King Hezekiah, when he got the message from the prophet Isaiah to set his heart in order for he was going to die and not live. He was not really ready to die. He turned his face to the wall and he began to pray desperately to God for healing. Describing his experience, Hezekiah said,

Like a crane or a swallow, so did I chatter: I did mourn as a dove: mine eyes fail with looking upward: O LORD, I am oppressed; undertake for me. (Isaiah 38:14)

So he describes this night as chattering like a crane or a swallow and mourning like a dove. So it would seem as though there were sounds that were not articulated into syllables at all. He understood that there was just a deep intercession from his heart when he felt that he was going to die.

Now the speaking in tongues is something that was promised in the Scripture. Isaiah 28:11 prophesied, For with stammering lips and another tongue will he speak to this people. To whom he said, "This is the rest wherewith ye may cause the weary to rest; and this is the refreshing": yet they would not hear.

This particular prophecy concerning speaking in tongues would probably not be allowed in theological circles as an argument for the gift of tongues--except that in 1 Corinthians 14, Paul uses this very Scripture as being predictive of the time when they would be speaking in tongues. So Paul, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, speaks of the Isaiah passage as a prophecy of speaking in tongues.

Now it is one of those prophecies of which they say it has a dual fulfillment. They often call it the near and the far. The immediate sense of this prophecy was concerning the drunkards of Ephraim who had turned their backs on God and were mocking Isaiah and his teaching method. In a mocking way, they were saying he ought to go back and teach children. His teaching is very simple. It is "line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little, there a little" (cf. Isaiah 28:10).

So because they were mocking the prophet of God (and really they were disregarding God because it was a drunken debauchery that was going on there), God said He was going to bring the Assyrians against them and that they were going to fall to the hands of the Assyrians. And so, because they will not listen to the teaching of the prophet--precept upon precept, line upon line--they will actually be hearing other languages (stammering lips). God will speak another tongue to this people and yet for all of this, He said, "They will not hearken" (cf. Isaiah 28:12).

Now what the prophet was prophesying was concerning the coming Assyrian invasion, when the Assyrians would occupy the land and the people would be hearing this strange tongue of the Assyrians in their streets. The Israelites would be hearing the Assyrian's strange language. And thus, hearing the Assyrian language would be a sign of God's judgment against them. This is God's judgment for their debauched lives and their forsaking Him.

The far fulfillment, of course, is found in the New Testament and the gift of speaking in tongues. And thus, Isaiah 28:12 said,

This is the rest wherewith ye may cause the weary to rest; and this is the refreshing.

Now in Mark 16, Jesus promised the gift of speaking in tongues. In the commandment, Jesus said,

Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature unto all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. And these signs shall follow them that believe; in my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues. (Mark 16:15-17)

So this is the prophecy of Jesus, or the promise of Jesus, concerning the signs that would follow those who believe Him. One of them would be speaking with new tongues.

Now there are those who would argue that the last twelve verses of Mark's Gospel are not found in some of the earliest manuscripts. It is true that these last twelve verses of Mark's Gospel are not found in the Codex Sinaiticus or the Codex Vaticanus, which are both a part of the Alexandrian family of manuscripts. However, it is interesting to note that the early church fathers, Irenaeus, who lived from AD 140 to 202, and Hippolytus, who lived from AD 170 to 235, both quote from these last twelve verses of Mark's Gospel.

Now the argument that some of the scholars give is that because this portion of Mark's Gospel does not appear in the Codex Sinaiticus, which is one of the oldest complete manuscripts that we possess (though it really is not complete), they say that this passage then was inserted later on by a copier. However, Codex Sinaiticus actually dates back to sometime into the AD 400s. They do not know the exact date, however 420 to 460 are the dates that are usually established for the Codex Sinaiticus. Here is Irenaeus, one of the church fathers, 200 years before the Codex Sinaiticus was ever copied and he is quoting, no doubt, from an earlier manuscript. And so, the overwhelming evidence is that the last twelve verses of Mark's Gospel actually were in the original manuscripts and somehow got deleted from the Codex Sinaiticus and the Vaticanus which comes, as I say, from the same Alexandrian family of manuscripts.

Now there is no question that these promises and prophecies were fulfilled in Acts. First of all in chapter two,

"And when the Day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. (Acts 2:1-4)

This could be translated, "as the Spirit gave them the ability." or as the Catholic Douay Version says, "as the Spirit prompted their speech." So here they are on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is given to the church and one of the remarkable signs was that they were all speaking in other tongues.

The word tongues is the Greek word glossa (actually in this particular passage it is glossais). And we do know that there were Jews from all over the world who had come to the Feast of Pentecost. Under the law, there were three major feasts each year and it was required of the Jews--it was mandatory--that the adult male Jew attend these three festivals or feast days in Jerusalem during the holy days. If they lived within a close radius, they had to be there. If they lived in another nation then they had to make a pilgrimage as often as was possible to be in Jerusalem for these feasts.

So always, when they would have one of the major feasts of the year (i.e., Passover, Pentecost or Trumpets, and the Feast of Succoth), there would always be Jews who were gathered there from all over the world. And this particular feast was no exception. And so, "when the Day of Pentecost was fully come," the Holy Spirit had come upon the church and there was a sound like of a mighty rushing wind, filling all of the house where they were seated. There were these cloven tongues of fire that were sitting upon each of them and they began to speak in these other tongues as the Spirit gave them the utterance--gave the ability or prompted their speech.

Acts 2 :6 says, "Now when it was noised abroad..."--what was noised abroad? Maybe it was the sound of the mighty, rushing wind. People came to see the origin of this sound that sounded like a hurricane to find the origin of the sound. When they gathered they were all amazed because they heard them speaking in the various dialects. And now you have another Greek word, dialectus. They heard them speaking in their own languages or in their own dialects. They were declaring the wonderful works of God.

In Acts 10, when Peter went to the house of Cornelius at the commandment of the Spirit, he came into the house and was preaching unto the friends of Cornelius that had gathered. In verse 44,

While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all of them which heard the word. And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost, for they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God.

So again this is the manifestation of speaking in tongues in the tenth chapter when the Holy Spirit came upon the Gentile believers.

Now in Acts 19, Paul came to the church at Ephesus and saw that there was a lacking in the church. And this was probably a lack of love because the fruit of the Spirit is love, which manifests itself in joy and peace and these other aspects of this word love. And Paul, seeing that there was perhaps very much life but not much joy, he asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they said, "We haven't even heard of the Holy Spirit." And so Paul asked them then, "Well then, how were you baptized?" They said, "John's baptism." And he said, "Well, John indeed baptized unto repentance, but he spoke of the one that was coming after him."

And he preached unto them concerning Jesus Christ and they were baptized. And then Paul laid hands on them and we read there in Acts 19:6, "And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them and they spoke with tongues and prophesied." So two of the gifts of the Spirit were manifested, the speaking in tongues and the gift of prophecy.

Now, what is the purpose of the gift of speaking in tongues? First of all, it is to assist the believer in his prayer life. In 1 Corinthians 14:2 Paul said,

For he that speaketh in an unknown tongue speaketh not unto men, but unto God: for no man understandeth him; howbeit in the spirit he speaketh mysteries [or divine secrets].

So Paul said that when you are speaking in tongues you are not speaking to man, you are speaking to God.

Now, Paul said that no man understands the person speaking in tongues. How do you equate this with Acts 2 where all of them understood in their own dialects as they were declaring the wonderful works of God? They were all amazed. They said, "Are not all of these who are speaking Galileans? How is it that each one of us is hearing in our own languages as they are declaring the wonderful works of God?" Paul said, "No man understands him."

Now this has led some to conclude that there are two types of tongues. One they call the "sign gift" of tongues and this is the sign that a person has received the gift of the Holy Spirit. And that is usually a language or a dialect. And then they have developed a term called the "prayer language." And they say that Paul, here in 1 Corinthians 14, is talking about a "prayer language" that God gives to the people to assist them in their prayer life.

In 1 Corinthians 13 where Paul is talking about the supremacy of love, he said, "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels..." And so they declare that the tongues of men would be the dialects or the "sign tongues," which could be understood by man. And the tongues of angels would be the "prayer language," which would be a heavenly language that is not any earthly dialect.

Now to be honest with you, that is not something that you can establish as doctrine. It is speculation in an endeavor to explain an apparent discrepancy. But there is not enough evidence to really present that as

doctrinal truth. There is not enough Scripture and not enough background in the Scripture to present it as absolute kind of doctrine. So there is insufficient scriptural basis to make such a distinction. The argument is made by reading into the text, rather than reading the text.

Now in 1 Corinthians 14:14-15, Paul said,

For if I pray in an unknown tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful. What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also.

So Paul, by his own admission prayed in tongues and sang in tongues. But it should be noted that he did not do this in the public worship services. He said,

"When I am gathered together with the church, I would rather speak five words with the understanding than ten thousand words in tongues that the church might be edified." (1 Corinthians 14:19)

And yet he did declare that, "I thank God I do speak in tongues more than all of you" (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:18). So Paul speaks about his praying in tongues. And I suppose that is where they get the idea of the prayer language.

The gift of tongues is not only to assist you in your prayer life, but it is to assist you in your worship of God. In Acts 14:16, Paul speaks of blessing God with the Spirit and the reference is to speaking in tongues. In verse 17, he declares it is a good way to give thanks. Again he is referring to speaking in tongues. So the gift of tongues was used to bless God and it was used to give thanks to God.

One of the difficulties that I have is that feeling of inadequacy in expressing to God my love, my appreciation, and my thankfulness for all that God has done for me. I often try to express my thanks to God but I find that many times words are inadequate. They really do not express the depth of feeling that I have.

It is interesting that the modern-day philosophers of existentialism are talking about what they have called "the ultimate experience." They have postulated the possibility of a person having what they term the "ultimate experience." And as they talk about this ultimate experience, they talk about the difficulty of it. Because it would be an experience that would be beyond anything you had ever experienced before. So that, you would be in such new territory that there has been no vocabulary developed to describe what you would feel. And thus, you would be totally incapable of explaining the ultimate experience to someone else, because there is no vocabulary that has been developed or devised that could actually relate what the ultimate experience was.

So if you should walk into a group of your philosophical friends and say, "Last night it happened," and if they would say, "Tell us about it," you would know that they were ignorant. You cannot tell about the ultimate experience, because it is the ultimate experience and there is no vocabulary. So it would be very isolating. You would be all alone. "I have had this ultimate experience, but I cannot tell you about it."

Now it is interesting as Aldous Huxley, one of the philosophers, talks about this "ultimate experience," he felt that the ultimate experience was probably dying high on LSD. And so, he died in a hallucination on LSD. He was not able to tell us whether or not it was the ultimate experience for him. The professors in Germany who were talking about this ultimate experience started having so many students commit suicide that they had to assure the classes that, "We are not certain that suicide is the ultimate experience." They

were trying to discourage them from committing suicide because they did not know.

The Christian experience of being born again is, in a sense, the ultimate experience. It is hard to describe to a person who does not have any spiritual understanding. The Bible says, "The natural man does not understand the things of the Spirit and neither can he know them for they are spiritually discerned" (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:14). So it is like trying to relate the beauty of the symphony to a deaf man. He lacks the faculties by which the enjoyment of the symphony is held. And so, try to describe to the blind man the brilliant colors of a sunset on a cloudy day. They lack the faculties. And so, the natural man lacks the faculties by which the things of the Spirit are understood.

And that is why we have difficulty in expressing to people the joy that we have and the peace that we have, because there is nothing that they can relate to. They have no base to relate to the things of the Spirit. They are foolishness unto him. Yet he who is spiritual understands these things, though he is not understood. They look at you and they scratch their head and they say, "I don't know. He is weird. He goes around smiling when they are repossessing his car. Look, they are towing his car off and they guy is just smiling. He is crazy!" We are not understood.

Now as the Bible speaks of some of the spiritual experiences it speaks about "the peace that passes human understanding" (cf. Philippians 4:7). So, how can you describe something that is beyond human understanding? You see the difficulty of it. It speaks of the "joy unspeakable and full of glory" (cf. 1 Peter 1:8). The unspeakable is indescribable. How can you describe something that is indescribable? It is just something that you have to experience. That is why the psalmist said, "O taste and see that the LORD is good" (Psalm 34:8). Until you taste it and experience it, I cannot describe it to you.

Now it may be that you go down to the Serrano Indians there in the jungles and you take a little ice-cream mixer with you and somehow get some ice and you make some vanilla ice-cream and you have some hot fudge and you whip up some cream and you put some roasted almonds on it. And these people have never seen ice-cream and never tasted chocolate. And you start eating it and you say, "Oh, this tastes so good. Ooh!" And they do not know. Their taste buds have never had the chocolate sensations. They have never had the cold vanilla ice-cream sensation. Never. And so they do not know--maybe it is bitter? And you have to just say, "Well taste it." You can say, "Well it is good. It is delicious." It is hard to describe to someone what chocolate flavor tastes like. I mean, "Well, it tastes like chocolate!"

So there are those experiences, there are those feelings, and there is that joy that is unspeakable. Paul, in praying for the Ephesians prayed, "that they might have a spirit of wisdom and understanding, to know the love of God that passes knowledge" (cf. Ephesians 3:19). So you are dealing out here in realms that are beyond us. It passes knowledge, and it passes human understanding. It is indescribable and full of glory. And thus we are talking about feelings and sensations that we have as we walk with God.

Now in the same token, as we come into this relationship, and we begin to experience God's love in our life, we begin to experience the joy of the Lord and the peace of Christ. And then trying to describe these to a person who has not felt them and does not know them--it is an impossible thing. You just cannot. Like David, you just have to say, "Well, taste and see that Lord is good" (cf. Psalm 34:8). You just have to try it for yourself.

By the same token, in trying to express our thankfulness and our gratitude to God for these wonderful things that He has done, again we find the limitations of language. And I always feel like what I have said is really very inadequate to describe what I am feeling in my heart. It is just overwhelmed with God's love

and with His goodness and with these blessings that God, through His grace has bestowed. And I always feel that I have not adequately expressed to God the depth of all that I feel.

And thus Paul declares that this is where the Spirit can assist us in blessing God, in our giving of thanks to Him. And as the result, as Isaiah prophesied, "This is the rest whereby I will cause My people to rest" (cf. Isaiah 28:12). He said it is a very refreshing and a restful experience.

Now to see how agitated some people get, I question whether or not it is a restful and refreshing experience to them. But the exercise of the gift of tongues in a person's own devotional life, I can assure you, is a very restful, refreshing, and beautiful experience.

Now the third purpose of speaking in tongues is also to edify the believer. The word "edify" means to build up or to be built up. In a spiritual sense it is to be built up in Christ Jesus or to have Jesus Christ be built up in you. We are exhorted many times in the Scripture to edify one another in love. And here Paul declares that when a person is speaking in tongues he edifies himself. And it is a very edifying experience.

Paul gives us the fourth purpose of the speaking in tongues. And here is a difficult passage because it seems to be contradicting itself in the context. So as you look at 1 Corinthians 14:22, Paul said, "Wherefore tongues are a sign not to them that believe but to them that believe not." This is a very difficult passage because in verse 23 he said, "If therefore, the whole church be come together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned or unbelievers, will they not say that you are mad?"

You see that seems to be totally contradictory. First of all, he tells us they are a sign for unbelievers. And then he said, if the church is gathered and an unbeliever comes in and you are all speaking in tongues, they are going to say you are crazy. So if it is a sign to the unbeliever, it is a sign that you are crazy. I mean--this is the way you would have to look at this.

J. B. Philips translated the New Testament into modern English and he has a very conversational kind of a translation. It is probably one of the easiest reading translations of the New Testament because of its flowing conversational style. He took the liberty to change 1 Corinthians 14:22 to read: "That means that tongues are a sign of God's power, not for those who are unbelievers but to those that already believe."

So he has changed it completely and then he explains in a little footnote: "This is the soul instance of the translators departing from the accepted text." He felt bound to conclude from the sense of the next three verses that we have here either a slip of the pen on the part of Paul, or more probably a copiest error.

Now by changing the translation it definitely removes the apparent contradiction. But I am not certain that he is correct or that this is the only possible way of interpreting what Paul is saying here. Again, the context of the passage is the prophecy of Isaiah. With stammering lips and other tongues God would speak to this people and yet, for all of this they would not believe. And therefore, tongues are a sign not for those who believe, but for those who believe not. "And yet for all of this they will not hear, saith the Lord" (cf. 1Corinthians 14:21). So it is a sign--but not a sign to make a believer out of an unbeliever--is one way to look at it.

Deuteronomy 28 and Isaiah 5 both seem to be prophesying of the Assyrian invasion as a sign of judgment. Deuteronomy 28:49 says,

The LORD shall bring a nation against thee from far, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flieth; a nation whose tongue thou shalt not understand; A nation of fierce countenance, which shall not regard the person of the old, nor shew favour to the young: And he shall eat the fruit of thy cattle, and the fruit of thy land, until thou be destroyed: which also shall not leave thee either corn, wine, or oil, or the increase of thy kine, or flocks of thy sheep, until he have destroyed thee.

And it talks about the besieging of the gates and so forth. So in this interpretation, the sign to the unbelievers is not to bring them to a state of belief but to be a sign of God's judgment upon them.

Now another possibility as we mentioned, there are those who talk about the "sign gift" of tongues versus the "prayer language." Looking at it as the sign gift, tongues are a sign to the unbeliever. Going back to Acts 2, when the Holy Spirit did come upon the church, these unbelieving Jews (they believed in God but did not believe in Jesus Christ), when they heard the disciples speaking in their various languages and saw the wonderful works of God, they realized that the disciples were all Galileans and could not have learned these languages. When Peter shared with them exactly what was happening, they were convicted by the Spirit and some three thousand of them were added that day to the church. And so, it did serve as a sign to the unbelieving Jews and it brought them to salvation on the Day of Pentecost.

Let me give you one more possibility. There are those who teach that speaking in tongues is the primary evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. And so, many people who have been exposed to this teaching do not believe that they have been filled or baptized with the Holy Spirit until they have spoken in tongues. And they look at that as the primary evidence of the fact that they have been baptized or filled with the Spirit, so that they do not believe that they are baptized until they speak with tongues. Thus, tongues become the sign to the unbeliever--not to the unbeliever in Jesus Christ, but to the unbeliever who does not believe that he has been baptized or filled with the Spirit until he has spoken in tongues. And that then becomes the sign to him that he has been baptized or filled with the Holy Spirit. And so that is one further possibility.

There are many people who are seeking the gift of tongues more than they are seeking the baptism of the Holy Spirit. And they really do not believe that God has baptized them until they have spoken in tongues. So tongues becomes a sign, but not to the believer--I mean, if you just believe which is the gift of God, and receive the Holy Spirit, that is great! But it is a sign to the believer in Christ who thinks, Well I have to speak in tongues before I can rejoice and say God has filled me, or before I have been baptized.

So there are six possibilities. Take your choice. You cannot really settle on any one of them and say, "This is absolute." You know, these are all possibilities and you have a wide variety of choices.

In the next lesson we will deal with a very important issue, as we continue in this series. Do all speak with tongues? Is it necessary to speak in tongues to be filled or to be baptized with the Holy Spirit? And we will be looking at just a lot of interesting issues on this fascinating subject of speaking in tongues.

Father, we thank You for Your Word. Truly it is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. And Lord, we desire to walk in the light of Your Word and to walk in fellowship with You. And we know that if we walk in the light, as You are in the light, we have fellowship with each other. And how we thank You, Lord, for the joy of that fellowship, for the comfort, for the peace, and for the blessing. Thank You, Lord, for what You are, what You have done and what You are doing. Receive, Lord, from our hearts the deep-felt thankfulness and appreciation of being a child of God--a son of God and if a son, then an heir and joint heirs with Jesus Christ. Lord, even as Paul told us to covet earnestly the best gifts, so Lord, we desire to

walk in the fullness of the Spirit. And like the Corinthian church, Lord, that we would not come short in any spiritual gift. That we might be open, Lord, to whatever You might to do. And so, Father, You see our hearts. You see the longing of our hearts for Your fullness. Fill us, Lord. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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