

Week Five
Reading

SPIRITUAL GIFTS



SCRIPTURE

Let's be honest.

It'll feel good.

Collectively, let's admit it...

Some parts of Scripture are very, very boring.

There are the genealogies...

Attai was the father of Nathan, Nathan the father of Zabad, Zabad the father of Ephlal, Ephlal the father of Obed, Obed the father of Jehu, Jehu the father of Azariah, Azariah the father of Helez, Helez the father of Eleasah, Eleasah the father of Sismai, Sismai the father of Shallum, Shallum the father of Jekamiah, and Jekamiah the father of Elishama. (1 Chronicles 2:36-41)

Then there are cultural moments whose significance is seemingly obscured by the passing of thousands of years...

Do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk. (Exodus 34:26)

And, of course, let's not forget the measurements...

All eleven curtains are to be the same size—thirty cubits long and four cubits wide. Join five of the curtains together into one set and the other six into another set. Fold the sixth curtain double at the front of the tent. (Exodus 26:8-9)

As if offering a confession of its own, Scripture itself acknowledges the limitations of these passages...

But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. (Titus 3:9)

We get that. We can accept it. But then there are those moments.

These are the moments when we are sifting through a passage, and although the passage is admittedly dry, something catches our attention. While sifting through what feels like sand, we discover a priceless diamond. We may not even notice it at first. It may take several times through the passage to catch the glimmer. When we see it, we're stunned.

THE TINKERERS

One such passage may initially seem like sand in the midst of more sand. Upon further reflection, we discover an event that must have been remarkable. While explaining the measurements of the

tabernacle, right in the midst of fabric folds and cubits, with a hint toward yet another genealogy, we read this...

Then the LORD said to Moses, “See, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts—to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship. Moreover, I have appointed Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, to help him. Also I have given skill to all the craftsmen to make everything I have commanded you: the Tent of Meeting, the ark of the Testimony with the atonement cover on it, and all the other furnishings of the tent.” (Exodus 31:1-7)

Pause on this passage. Turn too quickly and miss something profound.

There’s this guy, Bezalel, whose dad’s name was Uri. And there’s another guy, Oholiab, whose dad’s name was Ahisamach. Somewhere along the way—let’s assume it was at a young age—Bezalel and Oholiab received something unique from the Spirit of God. They were given uncommon ability to “engage in all kinds of craftsmanship” (Exodus 31:5). They simply had a knack for fixing things, for putting things together, for creating stuff others couldn’t create.

As youngsters, Bezalel and Oholiab would have tinkered. They would have been into things. They would have fixed things, created things, built things, and torn things apart. This tinkering may have even caused trouble at times.

Bezalel marches off with his mother’s earrings, nails them to a piece of wood, and turns them into something that is mildly attractive, but not exactly what Mom had in mind. “What am I to do with this boy?” Mom would ask the heavens.

Oholiab is constantly loosing Dad’s tools. Every time Dad’s looking for the handy blade to fix the family tent, it’s nowhere to be seen, and Oholiab is unusually quiet. “What am I going to do with you?” Dad would ask with as much restraint as he could muster.

Nobody suspected the abilities were anything more than a child’s tendency to tinker. Yes, everybody could see the skills. These boys could do things others could not do, but it’s unlikely that they had uncommon charisma or the ability to lead their peers.

Bezalel and Oholiab were good with their hands. That’s all.

That’s all?

Not exactly.

Unknown to family and peers, in the unseen world, a plan was unfolding.

The tinkering was not by chance. The skills were not secondary. The abilities given to Bezalel and Oholiab were given by the Spirit of God. These gifts and abilities would be refined over the years for a purpose both specific and profound.

Bezalel and Oholiab, along with others gifted with their hands, would use their skills to create the Tent of Meeting. It was this Tent of Meeting that would represent God’s presence with his people. Even more, Bezalel would build the ark of the Testimony. The ark of the Testimony would house the Ten Commandments and be considered so sacred that later people would die for touching it in an unholy manner.

Imagine what must have been simultaneously profound and frightening. One day, Bezalel and Oholiab would stand at a distance from their work and watch as...

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The cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud had settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. (Exodus 40:34-35)

That's a powerful moment.

God had prepared Bezalel and Oholiab for a date and time when he would need exactly what they had to offer. The work God did in their lives would match the work God was doing in the world. What likely started as the tinkering of children was later revealed to be the very work of God. God had a plan. He was orchestrating the plan by preparing two people with unique gifts and talents, while preparing work for these people to do.

Which leads to a question.

Are Bezalel and Oholiab unique?

GOD'S WORKMANSHIP

"Of course they're unique!" we think. "That's the very idea. They had competencies from God others did not have. God prepared a unique work for these unique people."

But is *that* unique?

Is it unique for God to prepare a unique work for unique people? Does God do for others what he did for Bezalel and Oholiab? Are they unique in finding a way to use their gifts and competencies? Does God do that for others or just a select few?

Consider the following from Paul's letter to Ephesus.

For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2:10)

That's profound.

To get the full weight, read it again in another translation.

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them. (Ephesians 2:10, NASB)

Two things...

We are God's workmanship.

God prepared work for us to do.

That sounds familiar.

Bezalel and Oholiab were God's workmanship. Through God's Spirit they received the ability to do things others were not able to do. The work God did in them was then matched by a work he had prepared for them. Not only did he give them gifts, but he gave them an opportunity to do something significant with those gifts. It's unlikely that it always felt significant, but there came a day when it all made sense. Bezalel and Oholiab saw the Spirit of God descend upon their work in a cloudlike presence, and the people of God were inspired and equipped to worship.

With this work of God through Bezalel and Oholiab in mind, consider the massive work God is currently doing. As previously noted:

I am making everything new! (Revelation 21:5, TNIV)

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God is up to something. He's making all things new. He's doing this through the establishment of the kingdom of God. Recall how Christ described his purpose:

I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God...because that is why I was sent (Luke 4:43)

So Christ came to establish the kingdom of God. How is he continuing this work today?

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. (1 Corinthians 12:27)

Christ is working, creating, and building. His "body" is at work. Each of his followers "is a part of it." With that in mind, consider a coming powerful moment.

Imagine the moment when Christ's people stand back, survey their work, and discover that "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever" (Revelation 11:15). This coming moment will be a resounding echo of the moment Bezalel and Oholiab saw the Spirit of God descend upon their work. This coming moment will be the revealing of a new existence where justice and mercy will prevail and the presence of God will be realized, recognized, and revered.

Like Bezalel and Oholiab, the people of God will see the fullness of their work. They will see that God was orchestrating a good and mighty plan, and by grace, they were allowed to take part in it. What often didn't make sense will then make sense. What at times felt insignificant will then be fully known as profound. What left them feeling marginalized in a world that had little use for them will then be seen as central. This will be a powerful moment.

Preparation and work toward this moment is happening right now. Right now, Christ is creating. His body is at work. It's happening in the seen and unseen world, and we are all invited to take part in it. Which leads to important questions:

How does this work? What must we do? How do we discover the workmanship of God in our own lives along with the work "God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10)?

Let's go to Scripture for greater clarity.

DIVERSITY IN THE BODY

One of the more important statements about the body of Christ is found in the following passage.

Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. (1 Corinthians 12:14-20)

One of the great inhibitors to a fully functioning body of Christ is the common misperception that the kingdom of God is primarily built by people with visible roles in the church. Not only does this deny the countless critical roles played by all God's people, but it also denies Scripture's job description given to pastors and teachers.

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up. (Ephesians 4:11-12)

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The very purpose of pastors and teachers is “to prepare God’s people for works of service.” The entire body of Christ is moved to action. Yes, the mouth speaks, but it speaks in order to inspire and equip the hands, legs, and feet. The work of God is not limited to a couple of people, to a once a week event, or to certain physical location. The work of God is done seven days a week; it is engaged by all God’s people, and it is done in every sector of society.

Which leads to a second area of thought. What are spiritual gifts?

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Consider two important passages of Scripture where spiritual gifts are mentioned explicitly. Read these carefully.

Romans tell us:

We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully. (Romans 12:6-8, TNIV)

First Corinthians tells us:

To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines. (1 Corinthians 12:8-11)

Let’s make an observation. Take note that each of these passages offers its own listing of gifts. There is overlap, but there are differences. The lists are not identical. This carries a message of its own. Scripture is not attempting to give a comprehensive list of spiritual gifts but is giving us a concept. The concept is that the Spirit of God crafts and empowers each person uniquely.

Names for the gifts will vary. Even today, one church will define the gifts a little bit differently than another. This does not mean we can inject any meaning we want into Scripture’s named gifts, but it does mean we should simply be asking, “How has God made and empowered me?” and “What is a unique contribution I can make?” rather than attempting to force ourselves into a mold Scripture did not create.

One such example of unique gifting in Scripture is Daniel and his friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. We read that “To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds” (Daniel 1:17). They were given, by the Spirit of God, the ability to engage literature and learning. In today’s language, we would say they were gifted academically. In addition, Daniel was given the ability to interpret dreams. The story of Daniel shows the critical nature of these gifts. These men gained influence from the respect they gained for their proficiencies. Even more, Daniel, with his ability to understand visions and dreams, spoke powerful words to powerful people at critical moments in history. These gifts mentioned in Daniel are gifts that may or may not be on the lists given in the New Testament, but they are certainly reflective of the kinds of ways God may choose to empower a person for the unique contribution he is preparing them to make.

In light of the diversity of potential gifts, it’s critical to observe that *all* of the gifts find their source in the Spirit. Equally attributed to the Spirit are gifts of healing and encouragement, miraculous powers

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and leadership, prophesying and teaching. We err when we attribute one kind of gift to a person's natural abilities and another kind of gift to something done by the Spirit of God. Yes, a person's gift may be reflective of that person's personality, but is God not influential in the shaping of that personality? Is there anything true about us that did not originate in the Spirit of God? Everything we have, all of our abilities, find their source in the workmanship of God.

For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not? (1 Corinthians 4:7)

As we consider unique contributions we can make, we must not limit ourselves to certain categories or to things traditionally considered natural or supernatural. Ultimately, it's all supernatural as it all finds its source in the Spirit of God.

Which is simultaneously true and also ripe for misapplication.

SPIRITUAL GIFTS ARE NOT STATIC

Yes, God is at work.

No, this does not mean we are without responsibility to strengthen and enhance our potential impact.

Scripture tells us “*we are God's workmanship,*” but this does not mean we simply sit back and wait for competencies to appear in our lives. At least two passages of Scripture point to our opportunity and our responsibility.

First, the opportunity...

...eagerly desire the greater gifts. (1 Corinthians 12:31)

Spiritual gifts are given by God, and we are told to eagerly desire gifts that will increase our impact in the lives of others. We must guard against categorizing ourselves and limiting our influence by what's true of us today. God may want to use us in ways that will require new workings of the Spirit in our lives. As Scripture exhorts us to “*eagerly desire the greater gifts,*” this is an exhortation to ask God for more. It is a good and noble prayer to request that God would increase our effectiveness, give us gifts we don't currently have, and equip us to accomplish works we are not currently equipped to accomplish.

And second, the responsibility...

I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. (2 Timothy 1:6)

Just because God has deposited a gift in a person's life, this does not mean the gift is at its maximum potential for effectiveness. We are exhorted to “*fan into flame the gift of God.*” Spiritual gifts are given as a spark or a small flame. It is when we use these gifts, train these gifts, and pray over these gifts that we experience the fanning of that initial flame toward the blaze of maximum impact.

This leads to another critical question. How do we discern our spiritual gifts?

SPIRITUAL GIFTS CONFIRMED

Paul was gifted as an apostle. Perspectives vary as to what this means exactly, but at a minimum, the word *apostle* means “one who is sent,” which is highly reflective of the work Paul did. He traveled the known world and entered into villages where “*he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord*”

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Jesus Christ” (Acts 28:31). Despite what is clear evidence of his gifting to us today, there were some in his day that challenged the validity of his ministry. They questioned if he was truly gifted and called to do the work he was doing.

Paul’s response is instructive:

Do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. (2 Corinthians 3:1-3)

The confirmation of Paul’s gifting, according to Paul himself, were the results that came from his work. He was affirmed in his gifting by fruit that came from his labor. The message to us is clear. Yes, we gain insight into our gifting through exercises, assessments, and even conversations with friends. That’s all important and will be part of this experience. Ultimately, though, affirmation of our gifts and calling come by acting on what we suspect to be true and discerning if God bears fruit through these actions. To be sure, this is not to say that if we do not see immediate fruit from our service that it means we lack gifts for this area of service. Reaping a harvest takes a great deal of perseverance. It is to say, though, that affirmation of spiritual gifts is most effectively found in their use.

SPIRITUAL GIFTS AND PASSION

Spiritual gifts are not the only factor that influence how and where we participate in the body of Christ. Consider the example of Paul and Peter.

For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles. (Galatians 2:8)

Paul and Peter had similar gifting. They were both apostles, were gifted in teaching, and they both worked to call people to Christ. Despite their similarities, however, the two labored in different fields. For reasons we know partially but not fully, Peter exercised his gifts in the Jewish cultures as Paul did the same in Gentile cultures. Both works were incredibly important and were empowered by similar gifts, but they were unique as well.

A person may discern that she has the gifts of leadership and encouragement. These gifts can be used in countless spheres of influence. Along with discerning her gifts, she must also consider her passion or calling. What excites her? Or, even if it’s yet to excite her, where does she sense God’s guidance? What “risks” is God asking her to take? Maybe she uses these gifts to organize connecting people who are new to her church. Or maybe she uses these gifts to start and lead a ministry that brings encouragement to those dealing with heightened degrees of hardship and pain. There are countless things she could do with her gifts; the complementary question is about passion and calling.

Which leads to the most important insight from Scripture about spiritual gifts.

THE SPIRIT OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS

The following passage is commonly read at weddings. The context, though, is not marriage, but spiritual gifts. Listen carefully to the words.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

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Spiritual gifts can be likened to tools. Tools can be used for good or evil. A hammer can be used to build a shelter for those in need of protection, but it can also be used as a weapon. Most important is not whether people have this or that gift but the spirit in which they use whatever gifts they have. Spiritual gifts are not points of pride. They are given, by grace, for the good of others.

As we increase our service and our participation in the body of Christ, we must be driven by love. Why do we do what we do? Do we do it for the applause of others? Or do we do it out of passion for the cause we engage? If we do it for the applause of others, or for any motivation other than love, not only are we the clanging cymbal mentioned above, but we will ultimately discover it's not worth it. It's not worth it because service is hard. Yes, there is joy and even a thrill in using our gifts. That's good. But we quickly learn that for every person who celebrates our actions there will be another who challenges our work or is offended by our efforts. Hear Christ's simultaneous warning and comfort.

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first... They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me. (John 15:18, 21)

Engaging the body of Christ, joining with him in his work, is not easy, and it's not worth it if we're motivated by anything other than love. If we're motivated by applause, there are far easier ways to get it. If we're motivated by the gratification of accomplishment, there are easier ways to get that, too. We engage the body of Christ, and we deploy our gifts for service because we have been liberated by the love of God in Christ, and we, too, want others to experience this freedom.

ENGAGEMENT

In closing, consider again our friends Bezalel and Oholiab. At some point, and Scripture does not record this interaction, Moses approached them with an opportunity. "We need your service," he might have said. "God has asked us to build his tabernacle, and you both have uncommon ability to bring this vision into reality." Their acceptance of this challenge would have been influenced by their recognition that the opportunity did, in fact, match their abilities. If they had these giftings, but had failed to reflect on them and recognize them, they may have balked at the opportunity presented by Moses. At some point, they saw their own unique abilities. Maybe it was through prayerful reflection. Maybe it was through comments made by their community. Maybe it was through the process of trying, failing, but trying again, that they simply saw their giftedness grow to a place where it was undeniable. Whatever it was, they knew their gifts and this knowledge helped them identify and embrace the service God had prepared them to engage.

We, too, must know ourselves. The failure to recognize God's workmanship in our lives could lead to the failure to recognize the work he prepared for us to do. So now it's time to dig in. It's time to roll up our sleeves, to evaluate, to pray, to reflect, and to assess. If we are going to participate in the body of Christ, it's essential that we prayerfully and carefully talk to God and others about our optimal place of service. How are we gifted? Where is our God-given passion? What gifts may God want to empower us with if we would simply ask him to do so? And most importantly, what's driving us? What's our motivation? Are we driven by love?

Engage deeply and with great passion: There are works God has prepared for you to do.