

About Spiritual Gifts (Part 2)

Barry O'Dell

Duration is defined as, “*the time during which something continues.*” In the previous edition, *spiritual gifts* were clearly defined and enumerated from First Corinthians 12. The gifts were miraculous abilities that were distributed as the Holy Spirit willed (1Cor. 12:11), through the laying on of the apostles’ hands (Acts 8:14-19; Rom. 1:11; 2 Tim. 1:6). A question that necessarily follows, and that is addressed in First Corinthians 13 is about the duration of said gifts. It is not uncommon to hear people speaking of so-called miracles today. “*It was a miracle that we survived the crash!*” “*The birth of our twins was truly a miracle!*” While some events may be hard to believe, that does not make them miraculous. A difficult pregnancy and birth or surviving an automobile accident may be an amazing event or even hard to believe, but that does not mean it was a miracle.

The spiritual gifts (aka, miraculous abilities) of First Corinthians 12:4-11 had specifically stated purposes. John recorded a select few miracles of Jesus in order to produce faith in the witnesses (Jn. 20:30-31). The author of Hebrews spoke of “*sign and wonders, and with diverse miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit*” (Heb. 2:4). As *signs*, spiritual gifts authenticated the one performing them as being from God (Acts 2:22). As *wonders*, the gifts would elicit a reaction from the witnesses (Acts 8:13). The miracles were *diverse* (many different kinds - Mk. 1:34). Miracles were also performed for the stated purpose of confirmation. The Great Commission in Mark’s account says of the signs, “*the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following*” (Mk. 16:19-20). It is also important to realize that miracles were not performed just because they could be. Why didn’t Paul just heal Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25-27)? Why didn’t he simply heal Timothy’s stomach problems (1 Tim. 5:23)? Because those who had spiritual gifts were not exhibitionists. They didn’t perform miracles just because they could perform miracles!

How long would they last? After all, many people claim that they can perform miracles and many more claim to have witnessed a miracle. Thankfully, the Bible addresses this question as well. Paul wrote, “*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. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is part shall be done away*” (1 Cor. 13:8-10). *Fail* and *vanish away* come from the same Greek word meaning, “*to render idle, to be inactive or inoperative.*” *Cease* is from a Greek word that means, “*to leave off or desist.*” The contrast in the context of signs being inoperative and desisting is that which was “*in part*” versus that which would be “*perfect.*” Also identified is **knowing** in part (v. 9, 12) being done away when “*that which is perfect has come.*” So, Paul has enumerated the spiritual gifts (12:4-11) and admonished the Corinthians because of their competitive spirit and exclusion based on the gifts received by individuals (12:15-26). He then instructed them in the “*better way,*” which was to do things out of love (12:31-13:7).

“They didn’t perform miracles just because they could perform miracles!”

First Corinthians 13:1-7 is often read or mentioned in wedding ceremonies, and rightfully so. However, the immediate context was regarding the use of spiritual gifts among the Corinthians. While doing that, Paul informed them that the gifts would “*fail...cease...and vanish away*” (13:8). A key to realizing to what those words refer is the mentioning of **knowing**. While the spiritual gifts were with them they were **knowing** “*in part*” and **prophesying** “*in part*” (13:9). There was a point in time coming when those “*in part*” things would be done away. Paul was not discussing a person. Some believe that the “*perfect*” is a reference to Jesus and that miracles will occur until He returns. The only logical and contextual thing to which the “*in part*” and the “*perfect*” could be referencing is revelation from God - **knowledge and prophecy**. Verse 12 also emphasizes this point: “*For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then I shall know even as also I am known.*” Paul was not discussing a **who** or a **what**, but a **how**. The *perfect* (brought to its end, finished, completed) was the revelation of God’s will. The faith once for all delivered (Jude 3). The spiritual gifts would come an end at that time because Scripture is the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17) and completely furnishes the man of God for all good things (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

The discussion of the sovereignty of God often manifests itself within the “prison of two ideas” fallacy. The prison of two ideas fallacy is that there are two and only two choices in a particular line of thought or action. In politics you'll hear things like, “you're either for immigration or you're a xenophobe.” “You're either pro-choice or you hate women.” “You'll start recycling or you want to kill all the polar bears.” The prison of two ideas is a very dangerous and fallacious place to live!

In the discussion of the nature of God, “sovereign” must be accurately defined. As a noun - “a supreme ruler.” As an adjective - “having ultimate power or authority.” God as God fits both definitions of the term - He is sovereign (Ps. 115:3; Rom. 11:33). The sovereign God created man in His own image and gave him dominion over His miraculous creation and gave him freedom of choice (Gen. 1:28; Ps. 115:16). Where many people fail in this discussion is dwelling within the prison of two ideas. “Either everything that happens has been predetermined by God from all eternity, or God is not God.” Determinism, according to britannica.com is “that all events in the universe, including human decisions and actions, are causally inevitable.” Theologically, it is the idea that every event, even every human action, has been predestined by God to occur and, as such, will necessarily take place

God being sovereign means that He is the supreme ruler of all things. However, that is not the same thing as saying He has determined everything that ever has happened or will happen. For instance, did God determine, from all eternity, that I would go home today and eat a ham sandwich for lunch? That's what I did. While that is an extremely insignificant event, the prison of two ideas would have us believe that either (1) He did determine from all eternity that I would eat a ham sandwich for lunch on August 12, 2025 at 12:00 PM or (2) God is not God. Or, perhaps we can divorce ourselves from the prison of two ideas and understand both the sovereignty of God and the freedom of man in light of Scripture. The two thoughts are not mutually exclusive.

Here's where Biblical context comes into play. Verses will be cited, such as Ephesians 1:11, to state that God has determined all things that ever have or ever will happen. Was that Paul's point, or was he saying that, in terms of salvation, the WHERE and HOW people would be saved from sin was determined from all eternity? Remember, Ephesians 1:11 was not written in a vacuum to prove an often misdefined idea of sovereignty. Words gain their meaning from the context in which they are used. What about Acts 2:23? Doesn't that prove that God has determined all things that would ever happen in human history were predetermined by God in eternity? Remember, the prison of two ideas says it is either, yes, God has done that or God is not God. Or, could Peter's words as recorded in Acts 2:23 refer to the fact that God did indeed have a very specific plan to save man from sin and that His plan would include the death of His perfect Son? There is no doubt that God, from all eternity, did have a plan to save mankind from sin and that “in the fulness of time” God enacted that plan (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28; Eph. 3:8-11). However, that is not the same thing as saying that God has determined all things that ever have or will ever happen - like my ham sandwich. Ecclesiastes 9:11 may help us here: “*The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding, nor favor to men of skill; but time and chance happen to them all.*” The reality of both “time” and “chance” does not conflict with the all-supremacy of God. There is no need to reject one in order to accept the other.

God being sovereign does not mean that He always *MUST* do everything He *CAN* do. God was grieved in His heart that His creation became so sinful (Gen. 6:5). If we take sovereignty to mean that God, from all eternity brought about everything that ever happens, He predetermined that man would come to that state, man had no choice in the matter because it was predetermined from all eternity, and God then punished them for doing what He predetermined them to do from all eternity. If it was predetermined from all eternity, mankind had absolutely no choice in the way he conducted himself in Noah's day. That is theological determinism, not sovereignty. While God is sovereign, man is free to choose - unless free doesn't really mean free. And this is where the double-talk often begins. “*Well, man is free so far as God in His sovereignty has allowed him to be free.*” Leviticus 26 loses all meaning. Deuteronomy 28 loses all meaning. Joshua 24:15 loses all meaning. Those invitations were extended to all Israel. However, with the misinformed idea of sovereignty that many have, only certain individuals could choose - and they *could* only choose because God predetermined that they *would* choose! And the dog begins chasing its own tail! Revelation 22:17 loses all meaning because, while the invitation appears to be extended to all, only certain ones whom God elected from all eternity will take of the water of life. Again, that is theological determinism, not sovereignty. God does not lose His sovereignty when man chooses to either obey or disobey Him. To say that man has free will is not to say that God is not sovereign. That is a false dilemma.

God is sovereign. God knows and sees all (Heb. 4:13). That is not the same as saying that He has predetermined everything that ever will happen. Nor is it to deny that God has indeed enacted His eternal plan throughout history. Where does my ham sandwich fit into God's eternal scheme of redemption? Maybe it doesn't. Perhaps I chose to eat it today and God's predetermined counsel had nothing to do with it. And yet, God is still sovereign.

This particular visit seemed odd. We had traveled to my parents' home on many occasions, but my father had never taken the time to discuss the pictures that were in the frames hanging on the wall. Many of them contained images of my two sons. Our third son, Noah, would not be born until about two years after my parents passed away in 2005. Most of the pictures were of my sons, Dad's grandbabies. My father, in a rather cryptic manner said, "I suppose when we are gone one day, you will take all of these pictures off the wall and remove them from the frames?" His comment caught me off guard, but I responded, "I have never really thought about it, but I suppose that will be what we do. However, I hope to have you and mom for many years to come."

Fast-forward to 2006 and a few months after both of my parents died within thirty-nine days of one another. The grief was still fresh, and I could still cry at the drop of a hat. I really wanted the world to stop for a few minutes so I could catch my breath regarding the synergistic grief I was experiencing. Consequently, we were going through things and removing pictures from the wall preparing to sell their home. It is hard going through the possessions of deceased loved ones, but alas, it had to be done.

Originally, I placed the pictures in boxes while still in their frames. It became obvious that taking the pictures out of the frames and placing them in a folder would make them easier for transport and storage. As I hastily removed the portraits, I glanced at the backs of the pictures to see at what age my children were photographed. There, in my father's handwriting, on the back of my oldest son's infant picture were written the words, "I hope to see you in heaven one day."

I immediately broke down and started crying. As I sobbed, I called my wife into the room, and I showed her what was inscribed on the back of the picture. It was a message left behind for me to find one day and it was a tremendous source of comfort. You see, some years earlier, my father repented of some things that were amiss in his life, and he was restored. Prior to this, I wondered and worried if it would ever happen. His refusal to partake of the Lord's Supper told me that he understood his condition too. He decided to be restored to Christ after his sister who lived in Texas died unexpectedly. When he died in 2005 of congestive heart failure, he was prepared to meet the Lord. Still, it was so very hard to be without him and mom.

***"This life is filled with
sorrow, pain, and ultimately,
one's passing."***

Considering these things, Jesus left us a message behind also. He made a promise to His disciples regarding what He was about to accomplish at Calvary. He said in John 14:1-3 says, *"Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also."* In "preparing a place," He made the ultimate sacrifice, so that we might be with Him eternally.

Before He ascended to the Father, He left another message regarding the salvation of our souls. He said in Mark 16:15-16 *"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned."* Jesus left a message for all of humankind, so that all might know the way that leads to eternal life - a way that we can follow.

In continuation of the idea expressed in John 14, Thomas seems puzzled about the "place" that Jesus was about to prepare for the disciples. He said in John 14:5-6, *"...Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?"* Jesus said to him, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."* The message and the way are clearly outlined in scripture. All we must do is obey God's word (Hebrews 5:8-9) so that we might have eternal life and never be parted from the faithful who have gone on to the reward before us.

This life is filled with sorrow, pain, and ultimately, one's passing. This temporary separation is so hard, but the promise of Heaven means no more pain, sorrow, death, or bereavement. There are no greater promises in this life than a home waiting for us in heaven. One day, we will all be reunited with deceased loved ones and friends who were faithful Christians forever.

If my family and I remain faithful until Jesus returns or the time of our departures, we will be together again in Heaven. Revelation 21:4 says, *"And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."* The message inscribed on the back of my son's picture reminded me of this hope in the midst of loss.

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The Churches of Christ

- Bible only (2 Pet. 1:3)
- Name of Christ (Rom. 16:16)
- Began in Jerusalem (Isa. 2:2-3; Acts 2:1-4)
- Established by Jesus (Matt. 16:18)
- Purchased with Jesus' blood (Acts 20:28)
- Married to Christ (Rom. 7:4)
- Established in the 1st century (Acts 2:47)
- Jesus the Head of the One Body (Eph. 1:22-23; 4:4; 5:23)
- Added to the church by God (Acts 2:41, 47)

Salvation

- Saved by grace, through faith (Eph. 2:8-9)
- Not by faith alone (Jas. 2:14-26)
- Not by grace alone (Matt. 7:21)
- Belief and baptism (Mk. 16:16)
- Repentance and baptism (Acts 2:37-38)
- Belief, confession, and baptism (Acts 8:37-38)
- Heard, believed, baptized (Acts 18:8)
- Baptized into Christ's death - raised to a new life (Rom. 6:3-4)
- Baptism - faith in God's working/operation (Col. 2:12)
- Faith and baptism (Gal. 3:26-27)
- Baptism does save us (1 Pet. 3:21)

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