

The Holy Spirit

Week 8: When the Perfect Comes: The Duration of the Gifts -- 1

Corinthians 13:8–13; Ephesians 4:11–16

Corinth had every gift in the catalog. Tongues, prophecy, knowledge, healings; Paul told them plainly, “you are not lacking in any gift” (1 Corinthians 1:7). And Corinth was also the most dysfunctional congregation in the New Testament: split into factions, suing each other, shaming the poor at the Lord’s table, and turning worship into a talent show where everyone spoke and no one listened. Right in the middle of three chapters correcting their abuse of spiritual gifts, Paul lifts his eyes and writes the most beloved chapter he ever penned, the hymn to love. But 1 Corinthians 13 is not a wedding decoration. It is an argument. The Corinthians were treating the gifts as the main event, and Paul tells them the gifts were temporary equipment for the church’s infancy, while love is the permanent thing, the “still more excellent way.”

Then he says it outright, with verbs that should settle a thousand modern arguments: “Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.” Hear what Paul is claiming. The miraculous gifts, the very prophecy and tongues and inspired knowledge the Corinthians prized, came stamped with an expiration. They delivered God’s revelation piece by piece, “in part,” like installments of a book still being written. When the complete thing arrived, the installments would have done their work. The child grows up and puts away childish things; the dim reflection gives way to a clear view; the scaffolding comes down when the temple stands.

Ephesians 4 paints the same picture from another angle. The ascended Christ “gave gifts to men”: apostles and prophets for the foundation era, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers to equip the saints, “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood.” There it is again, the movement from infancy to maturity, from being “tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine” to a grown body, joined and knit together, building itself up in love. The gifts were never the destination. They were the road crew, and the road they were building was the completed faith, “once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).

This week asks the question millions are asking, and answers it from the text: are the miraculous gifts for today? Behind that question stand sincere people, perhaps people you love, who speak in what they call tongues and claim prophecies and healings. We will measure the claims honestly against the Scriptures: what biblical tongues actually were, what “the perfect” means in Paul’s argument, and what God says abides now that the partial has passed, faith, hope, and love, the durable furniture of the Christian life. And we will learn to hold this truth the way Peter commands, “with gentleness and respect,” because the goal is never to win an argument. It is to anchor your own faith in what the Spirit actually promised, and to help others stand there with you.

Group Discussion: Nearly everyone today knows someone, a friend, relative, or coworker, who attends a church where speaking in tongues and modern prophecy are practiced and expected. What have you observed or heard about these practices, and how do you think a Christian should go about deciding whether they are the Spirit's work?

Personal Reflection: Paul says that when he became a man, he "gave up childish ways," and that the church was meant to grow from infancy into maturity. In your own faith, where are you still feeding on milk when you should be handling solid food (Hebrews 5:12-14)? What is one childish thing in your spiritual life it is time to put away?

Read 1 Corinthians 13:8-13; Ephesians 4:11-16

Study Questions

1. In 1 Corinthians 13:8, Paul names three miraculous gifts, prophecies, tongues, and knowledge, and declares they "will pass away" and "will cease," while "love never ends." Why does Paul draw this contrast between the temporary gifts and permanent love, and what was this contrast meant to correct in the Corinthian church?
2. The Corinthians ranked one another by giftedness and turned worship into competition, while neglecting the love that gives every gift its value (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). Where do you find yourself ranking Christians, including yourself, by visible talents rather than by Christlike love? What "noisy gong" activity in your life needs love restored to it?
3. Paul says "we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away" (13:9-10). In the context of revelation delivered piece by piece through the gifts, what is "the partial," what is "the perfect" (or complete) thing that was coming, and why does this argument point to the completed revelation of God's will rather than to heaven or the second coming?
4. Paul compares the era of the gifts to childhood and the era of completion to manhood: "when I became a man, I gave up childish ways" (13:11). Growing up means trading flashier things for deeper ones. How have you seen your own faith mature over the years, and where might you still be clinging to spiritual childhood because it feels easier or more exciting?

5. The tongues of Scripture were real human languages, never learned by the speaker but understood by hearers (Acts 2:6–11), and even at Corinth they required interpretation and were subject to the speaker's control (1 Corinthians 14:27–28, 32). How does this biblical description equip us to evaluate modern practices called "tongues," which are not identifiable languages and are often uncontrolled?
6. Paul insisted that in the assembly he would "rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue" (1 Corinthians 14:19), because everything must build up the church (14:26). When you speak in Bible class, conversation, or online, is your aim to instruct and build up, or to impress? What would change if edification governed your words this week?
7. Ephesians 4:11–16 says Christ gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers "to equip the saints... until we all attain to the unity of the faith," so the church would "no longer be children, tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine." How does this passage show the foundational, era-bound role of apostles and prophets (see also Ephesians 2:20), and what has Christ provided so His church can reach and maintain maturity today?
8. A church "tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine" is carried about by "human cunning" and "deceitful schemes" (Ephesians 4:14). In a world of religious media, viral teachers, and emotional appeals, how tossable are you? What anchors, in the word, in the congregation, in your habits, keep you steady, and which one needs strengthening?
9. Many sincere believers today claim tongues, prophecy, and miracle-working as ongoing gifts. Drawing this study together, the purpose of the gifts (Hebrews 2:3–4), their transmission through apostles' hands (Acts 8:14–18), Paul's expiration notice (1 Corinthians 13:8–10), the completed faith (Jude 3), and the test of real tongues (Acts 2:6–11), how would you lovingly show a charismatic friend what Scripture teaches, and how do faith, hope, and love (13:13) answer the fear that cessation leaves the church powerless?

10. Look back across this week's passages, the love chapter's expiration notice and Ephesians' portrait of the maturing body. The gifts passed; faith, hope, and love abide; and the complete word now does what the partial gifts once did. Name one specific way Jesus is forming you through this truth, and one concrete way you will pursue the "still more excellent way" of love this week.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: 1 Corinthians 12:4–11, the varieties of gifts apportioned by the one Spirit as He willed; 1 Corinthians 14:6–19, intelligibility as the rule of the assembly; Acts 2:6–11, the definition of biblical tongues as known languages; Jude 3, the faith once for all delivered to the saints; 1 Corinthians 16:13–14, watchfulness, steadfastness, and everything done in love