



GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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In order to better understand who they are made to be and what they are to do in their work, it is essential for Christians to discern their gifts. Each Christian's specific calling is related to the Spirit's work in the creation, personal regeneration, and empowerment for one's work in the church and in the world. The Old Testament has many things to say about the work of the Holy Spirit on the cosmos, the individual, and the theocratic level.

WHERE THE SPIRIT IS, THERE IS POWER

In some ancient languages, the words for "spirit," "breath," and "wind" are identical. This is the case in both Hebrew and Greek. The Hebrew word *ruach* and the Greek word *pneuma* could both mean "spirit," "breath," or "wind," depending on the context.

In the Old Testament, there are two Hebrew words for breath or wind: *Ruach*—heavy breathing, or *Neshamah*—quiet breathing. *Ruach* means breathing through the nose with violence. *Ruach* is also used for wind in Exodus 10:19—an exceedingly strong west wind, or in Exodus 15:8—a "blast" of the nostrils. It is sometimes used to describe strong emotions as in Genesis 26:35 where it describes a bitterness of spirit (*morath ruach*) of the Hittite wives of Esau toward Isaac and Rebekah. Where most translations of Isaiah 40:7 read "Spirit of the Lord," *Ruach Yahweh* could also mean "wind of the Lord." In both cases, the idea is

power. When the Spirit is present, the connotation is power. Our gifts are from the Spirit who can empower those gifts to accomplish the purpose for which they are given.

THE SPIRIT WORKS IN THE COSMOS

There are a number of passages that allude to the work of the Holy Spirit in creation, including Genesis 1:2, Job 26:13, Job 33:4, Psalm 104:30, Psalm 33:6, and Psalm 139:7. The general thrust of all these passages is that the “Spirit” completes or refines the work of creation. For instance, Job 26:13 says, “by His breath the heavens are cleared” or “made beautiful.” Job 33:4 says, “The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life.” Another instance is Psalm 104:30 which says, “You send forth Your Spirit; they are created, and You renew the face of the ground.”

It is important to note the Spirit is involved in creating men and women made in the image of God. This means that the created—or natural—gifts that humans are given are gifts from or of the Holy Spirit, as well as from the Father and the Son.

This helps prevent us from deprecating the gifts we are given in creation and over-exalting the “spiritual” gifts given in redemption. Both gifts in creation and redemption are from or of the Holy Spirit. The latter is not higher than the former; redemption is not necessarily greater than creation with respect to our gifts. Some gifts as we will see in the New Testament are “super” natural above and beyond the created gifts—but most of the gifts listed in the New Testament are a redirection, the unfolding, or the empowerment of created—or natural—gifts.

This means that we should generally not divorce natural and “spiritual” gifts. We can look at the gifts we have expressed throughout our lives as an indication of where we are to serve both in the church and in the world. For instance, one of the gifts mentioned in Romans 12:8 and 1 Corinthians 12:28 is administration. In my hundreds of vocational interviews, I have never seen someone who was disorganized in every area suddenly become the chief administrator of a church—or corporation. Many people can discern their gifts both before and after becoming believers, though this is not always the case.

THE SPIRIT REGENERATES AND SANCTIFIES THE INDIVIDUAL

People in the Old Testament were “born again” and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the most thorough source on this topic is a book by Leon Wood, *The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament*, in which chapters seven and eight focus on “Spirit Renewal in the Old Testament.”¹

Three times in John 3:1-10, Jesus talks about being “born again” or “born from above.” In verse ten, Jesus says to Nicodemus, “Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?” Jesus is saying here

that based on Nicodemus's knowledge of the Old Testament, he should have known about the Spirit's role in rebirth and renewal.

One example of an Old Testament passage that speaks this language is Ezekiel 36:26, which says, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh." This passage promises a new spirit and a new heart. The hardened heart is replaced with a soft heart. If we need the Spirit now to grasp divine things, would that that not also hold true in the Old Testament? How could anyone truly know spiritual realities without the Spirit? Being "born again" means beginning the process of being restored to what we were created to be. That process includes the development and discovery of our gifts.

THE SPIRIT'S WORK IN ISRAEL IS THEOCRATIC

The Holy Spirit empowered various people in different ways to establish and protect the kingdom of Israel. For instance, in Judges, various leaders such as Othniel were given power. In Judges 3:10 it says "the Spirit of the Lord came upon him" enabling him to lead Israel into war with the king of Mesopotamia. Judges 6:34 says that the Spirit of the Lord came upon the leader Gideon. The words "came upon" literally mean "clothed." The Spirit put himself on Gideon as a cloak and enabled him to lead his three hundred mighty men into battle against a vast number of Midianites. Similarly, in Judges 11:29-33, "the Spirit of the Lord fell on Jephthah," and he was able to win the battle against the sons of Ammon.

THE SPIRIT STRENGTHENS THE STRONG

The Lord also took people who were already gifted by his Spirit and caused their gifts to reach their potential. When the Spirit of the Lord fell on Samson, he became extraordinarily strong. Though he was already strong, the work of the Spirit made him nearly invincible. In Judges 14:6, a lion attacked him. The passage describes how "The Spirit of the Lord came upon him," and he was easily able to tear that young lion apart. Later in Judges 15:14 it says, "the Spirit of the Lord came upon" Samson so that he was able to break his bonds, pick up the jawbone of a donkey, and kill a thousand Philistines.

The Lord can build strengths and abilities. The Spirit of the Lord gave gifts of leadership, courage, and strength to these judges, enabling them to defend Israel against its enemies.

The Lord also took people who were already gifted by his Spirit and caused their gifts to reach their potential. In Exodus 31:3-5 it says about Bezalel, "I have filled him with the Spirit of God in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all kind of craftsmanship to make artistic designs for work in gold, in silver and in bronze, and in the cutting of stones, for settings, and in the carving of wood, that he may work in all kinds of craftsmanship."

So the Spirit could increase the gift of a man who was already a gifted artist. God not only provided a detailed blueprint for the tabernacle, its utensils, and furnishings, but also empowered people to excellently carry out his design. In Exodus 31:6 it says of other men, Oholiab and Ahishamach, “and in the hearts of all those who are skillful (wise), I have put skill (wisdom) that they may make all that I commanded you.”

All our gifts are affected by the Fall. They can be withered, misdirected, or dormant. The Spirit can take our created gifts and reveal them, direct them to his glory, and cause them to reach their potential. This is what the Spirit did for Bezalel, Oholiab, and Ahishamach. The Spirit can do this not only with artistic gifts, but also with gifts in education, business, politics, law, etc. The Spirit can unfold the potential of the gifts of those who ask.

THE SPIRIT INSPIRES SPEECH

The Holy Spirit inspired the prophets to speak God’s word. For instance, the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles alone mention quite a few prophets: Azariah, Jahaziel, Zechariah, and Amassi.ⁱⁱ The first three are prophets in a more traditional sense and speak forth God’s word to a particular situation. The last one—Amassi—is interesting and perhaps the most relevant to discuss.

Amassi’s story takes place in the days after Saul died when David was in the wilderness at Ziklag. Various groups of people were coming to him professing loyalty. A group of thirty men from the sons of Benjamin and Judah came to David. He wanted to know if he could trust them or not, so he said to them:

If you come peacefully to me to help me, my heart shall be united with you; but if you betray me to my adversaries, since there is no wrong in my hands, may the God of our fathers look on it and decide.

Then the Spirit came upon Amassi, who was chief of the thirty, and he said,

*“We are yours, O David,
And with you, O son of Jesse.
Peace, peace to you,
And peace to him who helps you;
Indeed your God helped you!”*

Then David received them and made them captains of the band.ⁱⁱⁱ

The phrase, “The Spirit came upon Amassi,” literally means the Spirit “clothed” Amassi. Then he was able to speak, not so much a prophecy about the future as an affirmation of loyalty in the present. He was able to speak so persuasively that David took the thirty men and made them captains or chiefs of his mighty men. The Spirit can do the same today, perhaps in a military context like the one above, in politics, in business, in education, or other situations. We can ask for the Spirit to give us persuasive speech so that others will have immediate confidence in the truth of what we say.

THE SPIRIT GIVES POWER TO LEADERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

When the prophet Samuel anointed Saul to be king, he said that when Saul met other prophets, “Then the Spirit of the Lord will come upon you mightily and you will prophesy with them and be changed into another man.”^{iv} Saul was gifted to be able to lead Israel as king. This was what made it even more dramatic when, after Saul’s disobedience, Saul was told that the Lord would give his kingdom to another—“a man after His own heart.”^v

In chapter sixteen, the Lord told Samuel to go to Jesse’s house, for one of Jesse’s sons would become the next king. One by one, Jesse’s seven sons were brought to Samuel, but the Lord indicated that none of these was the chosen one. Samuel asked, “Are these all the children?” Jesse responded, “No, there is the youngest who is out tending the sheep.” Samuel summoned this boy, David, and the Lord indicated that the young boy would be the next king. When Samuel anointed David, “the Spirit of the Lord came mightily on David.” In the next verse, “the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul.”^{vi}

In what sense did the Spirit come upon David and leave Saul? It seems that David was given the gift of leadership commensurate to being a king while this gifting was taken from Saul. It wasn’t that Saul lost his salvation, but that the equipping to be king was taken away. This helps explain why David cries out in Psalm 51:11, “Do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.” David saw what happened to Saul as a result of his sin—his depression and despair.^{vii} David knew that as a result of his murder and adultery, the Lord could reject him as king. So he prayed that the anointing, the empowering, or gifting not be taken away from him.

Although the context for this story is the theocracy of Israel, God can give gifts of leadership to people in political power, even to a head of state. This is not promised today, but it is a desirable gift and we can ask for the Lord to provide such empowerment. If he has done it before, who is to say he will not do it again?

IMPLICATIONS

1. Where people have gifts of the Holy Spirit, they have power. Believers can fail to appropriate their gifts, they can bury them in the ground, or they can fail to fully utilize them. However, when the Holy Spirit gives gifts, what he bestows is potentially powerful.
2. It is wrong to deprecate or separate our created—or natural—gifts and our “spiritual” gifts. Both are of or from the Holy Spirit. Although God can give new capabilities to people at any time, in most cases, he empowers or develops the potential of our created gifts for use in the church or in the world.
3. In both the Old and New Testaments, people need the Holy Spirit to overcome spiritual blindness and apprehend spiritual realities. People in both Testaments need to be born from

above and need their hearts of stone to become hearts of flesh. Being “born from above” means that we are being restored to what we are created to be. We are enabled to develop our potential.

4. God gave gifts to people in the Old Testament to enable them to lead the people of Israel in difficult times. For instance, the judges were empowered to defend Israel. One of their number, Samson, though in many ways unfaithful, was made stronger than normal (or perhaps utilized his full potential) when the Spirit came upon him.
5. God gave people with artistic skill even more skill by his Spirit so they could fulfill his plans to build the tabernacle and fashion its utensils. God can unfold, redirect, or develop the potential of the gifts he has given us. It is certainly appropriate to pray that the Lord would unfold withered or partially used gifts. In Luke 11:13, Jesus promises that just as evil people know how to give good gifts to their children, “how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”
6. God gave prophets the ability to speak about future events but he also gave some the ability to speak persuasively about present realities, even in military matters. The Spirit can give people power to elicit trust through their speech. Even in seemingly “secular” matters, the Spirit can empower effective speech.
7. The Spirit can give leadership not only to judges, but to people with political power, like kings. This gift of leadership is still present today and we can ask for the Spirit’s power both in the church and in the world.

We can pray for the Spirit to empower our gifts both in whatever we do. God has made everyone in a unique fashion to express his or her gifts in both the secular and sacred arenas—in church, at work, and around other people.

FURTHER READING

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Warfield, B. B. *Biblical and Theological Studies*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1952. See pages 127-156.

Wood, Leon J. *The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976. This is the best and most comprehensive coverage.

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ⁱ Leon Wood, *The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976).

ⁱⁱ 2 Chron. 15:1-7; 20:14-17; 24:20; 1 Chron. 12:18.

ⁱⁱⁱ 1 Chron. 12:17-18.

^{iv} 1 Sam. 10:6.

^v 1 Sam. 13:1-14.

^{vi} 1 Sam. 16:13-14.

^{vii} See esp. 1 Sam. 18:10-15.