



WHAT IS THE GIFT OF TONGUES?

- First, the **GIFT** of tongues is a GIFT from God, which is to say, it is a blessing to be desired, not a curse to be feared (cf. 1 Cor. 14:18).
- Second, the gift of **TONGUES** is a supernatural ability to speak in unknown languages that strengthen believers and signify either judgment or grace, depending on the context.

WHY DID GOD GIVE US SUCH A STRANGE GIFT?

- The gift of tongues was given as a sign of judgment.
 - 1 Cor. 14:21-22: *"In the Law it is written, 'By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to Me, says the Lord.' Thus, tongues are a sign [of judgment] not for believers but for unbelievers."*
 - Paul is quoting from Isaiah 28:11. In that passage, the drunk Israelite leaders (28:1-8) mock Isaiah's words as childish babble (28:9-10). Isaiah's response is that when they disregard the simple word of God as childish babble, God will send an army of foreign invaders to speak to them in similar unintelligible babble (28:11, 13). This foreign speech will be a sign to them of God's judgment for rejecting His Word.
 - Dr. Gordon Fee notes that Paul uses this Isaiah quote typologically (prophetic foreshadowing), applying it to the phenomenon of uninterpreted tongues. Just as Israel once heard foreign babble as a sign of God's judgment for their hard hearts, so now, when unbelievers walk into a chaotic church service filled with uninterpreted tongues, they too experience confusion—not conviction.
 - Paul then makes the application in 1 Cor. 14:23 (interpretive paraphrase): *"Don't speak in tongues publicly without interpretation. Rather than receiving the gospel, unbelievers will think you're crazy, deny the gospel, and suffer judgment like the Israelites did!"*
- The gift of tongues was given as a sign of grace.
 - Tongues provides evidence of the Spirit's work (cf. Acts 11:15, 17).
 - Tongues strengthens believers (more on that below).
 - God's grace on Pentecost displays a reversal of the judgment at Babel. At Babel, man tries to reach God's domain in heaven; at Pentecost, God comes to man's domain on earth. At Babel, man unites in pursuit against God; at Pentecost, God unites His church with the baptism of the Spirit. At Babel, God judges the nations by scrambling their speech; at Pentecost, God graces the nations by unscrambling their speech. At Babel, God disperses the nations; at Pentecost, God disperses us... to reach the nations.
 - Part of Babel's significance is that it marks when God handed the nations over to their respective "gods," adopting only Israel as his portion (Deut. 32:8-9; cf. 4:19-20). At Pentecost, God initiates a reversal by securing the inheritance, not only of Israel, but of every nation (Acts 2:5-13; cf. Matt. 28:18). Now, through the church, His aim is to persuade them of His Lordship (Acts 1:8; cf. Matt. 28:19-20). When His mission is complete, God will not erase languages. He will redeem them. God's throne room will forever be filled with a multi-lingual melody of salvation (Rev. 7:9-10).
- At the exact same time, the gift of tongues was given as a sign as judgment and of grace.¹

WHAT IS BEING SPOKEN?

- There are different "kinds" (or "species") of tongues (1 Cor. 12:10, 28).
- These "kinds" could include a variety of earthly languages or heavenly languages.
 - The "tongues" in Acts 2:8-11 and in 1 Corinthians 12-14 appear to be different.
 - In Acts 2, the "tongues" seem to be human languages, understood even by unbelievers who lack the spiritual gift of interpretation.
 - I interpret the "tongues" of 1 Corinthians 12-14 to be heavenly languages because:

¹ Given the example of Isaiah's prophecy, this makes sense. God speaking to His people through the lips of Babylonian and Assyrian captors (the original context of Isaiah's prophecy) would at once be a reminder of God's judgment (they were captive!) and grace (God was speaking!). Furthermore, Jesus came to baptize "with the Holy Spirit (grace) and fire (judgment)." Is that not exactly what we see at Pentecost? A literal fire hovers over the heads of the tongue-speakers (Acts 2:3) as a sign of judgment—God is speaking to the dispersed and unreceptive nation of Israel in foreign tongues, just as He prophesied (Is. 28:11-12). At the same time, God pours out His grace in the form of 3000 people getting saved and the birth of a Spirit-baptized community.

- Understanding tongues requires the spiritual gift of interpretation rather than a natural ability, like understanding Russian (1 Cor. 14:5, 13, 26-28).
 - The tongue-speaker declares “mysteries in the Spirit” and “no one understands him,” for he speaks “not to men, but to God” (1 Cor. 14:2). This sounds like a private prayer—unrecognizable by earthly translators—not a human language.
 - In the context of spiritual gifts, Paul refers to “tongues of... angels” (1 Cor. 13:1).
- The words could fall into the following categories:
 - Declaring the wonders of God (Acts 2:11).
 - Praying to God (1 Cor. 14:14, 28; often called a “prayer language”).
 - Singing praises to God (1 Cor. 14:15).
 - Giving thanks to God (1 Cor. 14:16-17).
 - There is some debate about whether the words spoken by a tongue-speaker are only vertical (spoken TO God) or also horizontal (spoken TO people). It seems to me that they are vertical, but we should not be dogmatic about this.

HOW DO WE SPEAK IN TONGUES?

- The Spirit enables speech, but He does not hijack mouths: “All of them... began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled” (Acts 2:4)—THEY spoke; the SPIRIT enabled.
- Our spirit speaks by the power of God’s Spirit: “if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays” (1 Cor. 14:14).
- Speaking in tongues can occur spontaneously and without invitation (Acts 2:3-4; 10:46).
- Speaking in tongues can be practiced at-will (1 Cor. 14:15-16, 27).
- Speaking in tongues can be stopped at-will (1 Cor. 14:28).
- Speaking in tongues is like all spiritual gifts in that God sovereignly gives them to whomever He chooses (1 Cor. 12:11), and yet we can seek after them in prayer (1 Cor. 14:1, 13).

WHAT DOES THE GIFT OF TONGUES DO FOR US TODAY?

- The gift of tongues strengthens our spirits.
 - 1 Cor. 14:4: *“He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself.”*
 - This is why Paul spoke in tongues more than anyone (1 Cor. 14:18).
- When accompanied by an “interpreter,” the gift of tongues also strengthens the church.
 - Some people are supernaturally gifted to interpret tongues (14:26). If there is no interpreter, we should pray for an interpretation so that the church can be strengthened (14:13). Otherwise, we should speak quietly, between ourselves and God (14:28).
 - Paul argues for the superiority of the gift of prophecy over (uninterpreted) tongues because prophecy can be understood and therefore strengthens the church (14:1-5).
 - He does this because Corinth had fallen into believing that speaking in tongues made them extra “spiritual.” Paul’s point is that no spiritual gift makes us spiritual; love is what makes us spiritual (cf. 1 Cor. 13). In regard to tongues, we exhibit love by:
 - Not speaking in tongues before the corporate assembly unless there is an interpreter (14:28), and...
 - ...not speaking in tongues in a disorderly and disruptive manner (14:27).

WHAT DOES THE GIFT OF TONGUES NOT DO FOR US TODAY?

The gift of tongues does not tell us who is baptized in the Spirit and who isn’t.

- Many Christians teach that we can receive a baptism in the Holy Spirit subsequent to conversion, which empowers them for ministry. This baptism, they say, is evidenced by tongues.
- While I affirm the experience of Christians who have enjoyed the Holy Spirit’s ministry in this way, I would argue that the baptism of the Holy Spirit occurs at conversion (1 Cor. 12:13), and it is not necessarily evidenced by speaking in tongues (12:28-30).
- The baptism of the Spirit is: the promise of the Father (Acts 1:4), by the work of the Son (Jn. 7:39), to immerse new believers in the Holy Spirit, for the purpose of incorporating them into Christ’s body and empowering them to minister (Acts 2:1-47; 1 Cor. 12:13).
- Regardless of how we articulate the Holy Spirit’s ministry, we must avoid creating two-classes of Christians: (1) Spirit-baptized, tongue-speaking, super holy Christians, and (2) everybody else.

The gift of tongues does not make us more spiritual.

- It's not the *gifts* of the Spirit, but the *fruit* of the Spirit that makes us spiritual (Gal. 5:22-23; cf. 1 Cor. 2:13-3:3).
- It's not the *language* we speak in, but the *condition of our hearts* that makes our prayers powerful. God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble (Jm. 4:6-7).

CAN EVERYONE SPEAK IN TONGUES?

- Not everyone will be given the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues.
 - 1 Cor. 12:28 And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and **various kinds of tongues**. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all possess gifts of healing? **Do all speak with tongues?** Do all interpret?
 - Paul's implied answer in each of these is, "No."
- Some have suggested that 1 Corinthians 12 is talking about the public gift of tongues (which only some have), in contrast to a private gift of tongues (which everyone can have). But Paul uses the same word to describe tongues in every context, with no apparent distinction.
- It should be noted that all the spiritual gifts can be practiced by anyone, on any occasion. All can encourage, but some have the spiritual gift of encouraging others; all can give money, but some have the spiritual gift of giving; all (Christians) have faith, but some have the gift of faith. Likewise, all can speak in tongues on any occasion, but those gifted in tongues can do so regularly, like the Apostle Paul ("I'm glad I speak in tongues more than all of you!")
- Practically, if you really want the gift of tongues, you should pray for it.
- At the same time, you should not feel discouraged if you have prayed many times for tongues and never received it.