

THE GLORY OF GOD IN HIS GIFTS

1 Corinthians 12v7-10

God loves to surprise us by the way He reveals Himself to us. Like six year old Matthew question in 2005. *“Why do we not have a church now?”* At the time we were meeting with a core group of adults on Sunday evenings at Longhirst Hall in the earliest stage of planting our first church in the county. Some families were taking their kids to City Church in the mornings. Matthew’s question was like a punch to the solar plexus. God used it to speak to us about it being time to move to the morning so that whole families could begin to come. This incident is part of our church’s story now.

A month ago, I spoke at Whitley Bay to a coastal church planting group from City Church, and told them this story. My son Phil was present. Last Sunday Phil preached here. Come Saturday evening he was still uncertain about what message God wanted him to bring to us; this was the latest he had ever known. He resolved to get up very early. Overnight he had a dream in which he saw Matthew. Then he heard someone ask him, *“What is prophecy?”* Matthew replied by punching out the outline of one of Phil’s messages! So that was the one Phil preached here last Sunday. Perhaps he should have got Matthew to preach it. Don’t you just love God’s sense of humour?

v7: To each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. What are ‘manifestations’? The equivalent verb means *‘to make visible’*, often by uncovering something in the process. Paul could be referring to “that which the Spirit makes visible”. But there is another way to read this: **that which makes the Spirit visible.** In other words, God wants to reveal *Himself in His gifts.* These “manifestations” of the Holy Spirit are not given so that we can show off, but that God might reveal Himself in some gracious way to others.

This leads to a list of spiritual gifts in vv8-10. This is not a complete list. It is a sample to make the point that there are gifts other than tongues and that each is given for the common good to meet the needs of others and strengthen the church. So what are these gifts? What do they tell us about the Giver? How do they operate in the life of the church?

We will look at the first four of Paul’s examples over the next few weeks, but give particular attention to the fourth, “Gifts of Healings”.

1. To one there is given through the Spirit the word of wisdom

This was especially relevant in Corinth with its preoccupation with Greek “wisdom”. The expression means either **an utterance full of wisdom** or **an utterance characterised by wisdom.** This tells us something about the Giver. God is a God of Wisdom. Proverbs 3v19: *“By wisdom the LORD laid the earth’s foundations, by understanding he set the heavens in place.”* Jewish Wisdom literature tells us that godly wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord.

Biblical wisdom is the opposite of worldly wisdom. Worldly wisdom says there is no God and we are masters of our own destiny. Godly wisdom delights in how great God is and how dependent we are on Him. I love to listen to someone who has been a believer for six months speaking about how wonderful Jesus is and what He did on the cross. Or to hear them talk about how they now ask God to help them and guide them. This is godly wisdom. It is a glorious sign of the Holy Spirit of in their life. Some would say this is all foolishness. But the Bible says the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom. (1 Corinthians 1v25)

Jesus was full of this kind of wisdom. In Matthew 22v15-22 Jesus is asked by his enemies whether they should pay taxes to their Roman overlords - a very sensitive subject. Jesus knows this is a trap and He requests to see a coin. (i.e. a silver denarius; the so called "tribute penny") On one side of the coin there is a portrait of Tiberias Caesar and the inscription "*Of Tiberias Caesar, son of Augustus*". The coin has Caesar's image on it, and says it is his property. So Jesus says: "*Give to Caesar what is Caesar's*". Give the coin back to the one to whom it belongs! But on the reverse side of a denarius was a Portrayal of the Emperor (or his mum!) sitting on a throne wearing a diadem on his head and clothed as a high priest; and this inscription: "*Pontifex Maximus*", Highest Priest. "*And give to God what is God's.*" Worship belongs to God alone. What glorious wisdom!

This is what the Holy Spirit can give us too. But the Spirit's gifts are not primarily self-helps. Many of us still have a very individualistic idea of being a Christian. God has put us into His Body, the church. We need each other. When you or I hit difficulties the Spirit's wisdom often comes to us through someone else. God loves to do this. He is interested both in helping individuals *and* building His church. He can do both as the gifts are received and passed on. When we plough on by ourselves we miss this.

2. To another the word of knowledge by means of the same Spirit

Once again, "knowledge" ('gnosis') was one of the Corinthians' buzz words. Here, **the word of knowledge** is an utterance by the Spirit that is full of revelation from God. Of course knowledge of God learned by study also requires the illumination of our minds by the Spirit, but the gift referred to here is **an utterance which comes by direct revelation from God.**

Again this points us to the Giver and what He is like; in this instance to God's Omniscience. He knows and sees everything. Job 31v4: "*Does he not see my ways and count my every step?*" This is the background against which we must understand the classic word of knowledge which involves personal information revealed by the Spirit. Jesus' knowledge of the woman at the well in Samaria in John chapter 4 is usually cited as an example of this.

In Hove a lady came along to our meeting for the first time having seen people flock to the building for months. One Sunday morning as she was

gardening she decided on the spur of the moment to join them. During the worship one of the members said something like this: "I see a picture of gardening gloves and I believe God is saying to someone: *"I love you and want you to know me."* A bit of a strange thing to say! Yet the woman realised she was sitting there with her gardening gloves in her pocket. She had stuffed them there in her hurry to come along. The "word of knowledge" pointed her to faith in Jesus.

God knows you inside out! When this gift operates it is not to embarrass you; it is to direct you to God and do you good. It is not just a platform gift. God may show you something more privately. If so, handle it sensitively. Don't blunder up to someone and dump it on them. It is important to pray and ask God what it might mean. If you sense that God is showing you something serious you may need to check it with a mature Christian. But whenever you speak to the person in question, say something like, *"Does this mean anything to you?"* or *"Does this make any sense?"* A gift like this will always be for the good of the person, and this needs to be reflected in the way you serve it up!

3. To another faith by the same Spirit

The gift of faith here is not the same as saving faith, although that too is described as a gift in Ephesians 2v8. Here it is faith that *"moves mountains"* (1 Corinthians 13v2). We can trace it back to Jesus' words to his disciples in Mtth.17v20. *"I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."* To speak of moving mountains was a way of referring to the impossible. Jesus says that through even the smallest faith, "nothing will be impossible for you."

So what does this gift reveal about God to us? His Omnipotence! His mighty power! He is the God of the impossible!

*"Ah Lord God, Thou hast made the heavens and the earth
by Thy great power*

*Ah, Lord God, Thou hast made the heaven's and the earth
by Thine outstretched arm*

Nothing is too difficult for Thee, Nothing is too difficult for Thee

Great and mighty God, Great in counsel and mighty in deed

Nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing; Nothing is too difficult for Thee."

God created the universe out of nothing! So nothing is too difficult for Him!

God can give us a gift of faith for occasions when we are faced with a mountain. Like being challenged to pray for rain in a drought! I will let one of our members, Mary, tell her story: *"My co worker, Monica, and I were working on language analysis in a village in Ghana, prior to Bible translation. The people were subsistence farmers and dependent on the rhythm of the seasons – wet and dry – to produce crops for their food.*

At one time we were preparing to leave the village to go to our Branch conference, and made a courtesy visit to the chief the day before leaving. It

was nearing the end of the dry season and hoped for rains were late in coming and drought was feared. At the chief's compound we found he was preparing to sacrifice a dog to ask the spirits to send rain. I said God was more powerful than the spirits and only He could send rain. The chief challenged me – "You ask God to send rain then." We told him the elders should be there and agree about this, and he summoned them. We explained again our belief in God and they agreed we should ask Him to send rain. We prayed and I asked that rain would come that day. The verse which came to mind and which gave assurance of His answer was in James chapter 5: "Elijah was a man just like we are, and ... God sent rain."

Later in the day there was rain – it did not continue overnight and very early in the morning the chief went out to look at the ground. He came to tell us it had dampened. But about half an hour later the rain came in torrents and continued all day. We had planned to do our washing hoping to get it dry before leaving but that didn't happen. During the day, the elders came individually to say 'thank you' for the rain – we told them it was God who sent it. (In that culture it was polite to thank someone the following day for anything they had done for you.)

Late afternoon, Don the WEC missionary who was to be speaker at our conference, came to pick us up to travel with him. He commented that in all the years he had been in Ghana – about 25 years, he could not remember a time when it rained during the day in the dry season; any rain at that time usually came at night."

God had answered the prayer of faith! God loves faith. We cannot please Him without faith. (Hebrews 11v6) But, is this kind of faith something we wait around for? Not at all! Mary's life was in tune with God so that when the challenge came God could give her faith for to speak to "the mountain"! We can fill our minds with truth about God's power. We can confess God's truth with our lips: We can repeat the words of Jesus. *"With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."* (Mark 10v27) We can visualise God "moving the mountain". We can get our faith stirred by the other believers in the church. And we can take physical steps which express faith. Here is another example, hot from the press!

A week ago one of our couples took a giant step of faith towards buying a property which would represent an important bridgehead for us in church planting. After almost a year they had still not sold their house and time was tight. So they were going ahead even though this had big financial implications. They had talked and prayed it through with others and the result was they had "faith" for it! When they texted me to tell me, I replied *"Wow! Faith pleases GOD."* Within two days they had the buyer they needed, and one who was in a hurry to move by mid August.

So let's ask God to make us much more open to the Spirit's gracious gifts.

4. To another gifts of healings by that one Spirit

Healing was a regular feature of Jesus' ministry in the Gospels and of apostolic ministry in 'Acts'. Healings were prophetic signs of the Messiah's arrival and the Kingdom breaking in. Each one said something about God Himself: about His compassion for needy men and women, His anger at the suffering brought into the world by sin; about what the future will be like with Him. But notice, in this list, it is literally **gifts of healings**. Both words are plural. Why?

It may simply reflect the variety of different sicknesses healed. We only need to look at the Gospels to see this. Jesus healed people from diseases such as fever, leprosy, haemorrhaging, 'dropsy' & spondilitus. He restored people with crippling disabilities like paralysis, withered limbs, blindness, deafness, an inability to speak and lameness. He set people free from demonic activity which was affecting them physically and emotionally: He healed a man from an injury in Gethsemane - a severed ear. He healed some who had terminal illnesses – a centurion's servant and a royal official's son. And, of course, he raised the dead – the ultimate physical healing.

Or the plural may be to steer us away from saying *"I have the gift of healing!"* **Gifts of healings** are distributed liberally among the body of Christ, both to minister healing and receive healing. v11 says *"he gives them to each one, just as he determines"*. The Spirit is sovereign in the way and to whom He gives His gifts. He gives gifts as He pleases. Sometimes the most surprising people are gifted by the Spirit to bless the church. These healing gifts are to serve others and strengthen the church, not for any one person to make a name for themselves. Pastor Yongi Cho in Seoul South Korea has been used by God to minister healing to hundreds of very sick people. This is what he writes: *"Many people come and ask me whether I have the gift of faith, or the gift of healing. But I've searched through my heart and so far I have not found any gift in me. I believe that is because it is the Holy Spirit who has the gifts. He dwells within me. The Holy Spirit manifests Himself through me; I do not have any of the gifts, only the Holy Spirit, and I just obey Him, and believe in Him."* (Cho: 'The Fourth Dimension' pp33f.)

But **gifts of healings** may also refer to the variety of ways people receive healing. This is what I want to linger on this morning. I want to stir your faith for God to break in with healing in any number of ways. Here are some examples.

- Healing may be received via a gift of faith.

This illustrates the overlap between the Spirit's gifts. A few years ago on door to door visits I met a young woman called Louise who was a member of a local Methodist church. She told me her story. For four years she had been in a wheelchair suffering from M.E. During those years she lived with a promise from God that she would be healed. Then she attended an annual Methodist Covenant Service. At one point in the service these words were declared: *"Walk in confidence!"* As she heard them they triggered faith & she knew she

was healed. And she was! She got out of her wheelchair and never needed it again.

- Healing may be received as someone exercises their faith muscles.

The woman with a haemorrhage who reached out and touched Jesus' garment was exercising her faith muscles. A royal official did the same. His dying son was healed at the moment Jesus said "Your son will live" – because he *"took Jesus at his word and departed"*. As he walked he was exercising his faith muscles, and the boy was healed without Jesus even visiting him. Louise from New Eltham not only received a gift of faith but she had to exercise her faith muscles by physically getting out of the wheelchair.

As a young man in South Africa, Rob Rufus sensed God tell him to pray for a blind woman by the side of the road. He did but the next day he walked that way and she was just the same. As he wrestled with God over this he felt God say *"Well done son, I'm so proud of you for obeying me!"* A little later he was invited to preach at a church and as he prayed about this he sensed God telling him that there would be a blind baby there and that he was to pray for the child. The Sunday came but the congregation was all adults. He thought *"Oh no, I'm deceiving myself into thinking God is speaking to me."* Nevertheless, at the close he asked tentatively, *"Does anyone here have a blind baby?"* A woman beamed, bent down and from under her seat produced a baby who was indeed blind. Rob prayed for the child and she received her sight. That child is now a woman with total sight.

- Healing may be received through the laying on of hands.

This was a characteristic of Jesus' healing ministry. Luke 4v40: *"When the sun was setting, the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness, and laying his hands on each one, he healed them."* One of the most powerful incidents of healing in the Gospels involved Jesus touching a man who was full of leprosy. (Mark 1v41) This touch was not some slick routine. It was an expression of Jesus being *"filled with compassion"* for the man. The late John Wimber issued a cautionary word here: *"I ask permission to lay hands on people to show respect for their personhood."*

- Healing may be received by one prayer prayed over many people.

This may be in a church meeting, a conference or a special event.

This may be accompanied by specific words of knowledge i.e. insight from God about specific sicknesses people are suffering from which builds faith for healing. Some platform ministries precede or follow their preaching with words of knowledge for healing. These gifts of healings are often used by God as signs to those who do not yet believe in Christ, to help them come to faith. We have been seeing this recently in *newfrontiers 'Front Edge'* evangelistic weekends. But this is not just for platform ministries. Any one of us may receive gifts of healings via a word of knowledge, and not just in a big meeting context. Cell groups are a good setting for this.

Or the prayer may be a very general one. In his ministry Smith Wigglesworth made it his practise to lay hands on people individually. But in Sweden in 1921 controversy was stirred up by the press, especially by the way he prayed and laid hands on the sick openly in public. He was in danger of being ejected from the country. So he used a different method one Whit Monday in the open air with a large crowd thronging about.

“Fixing his attention on a lady who was standing on a vantage place on a rock he asked her what the matter was. She said that she was in great pain all over. He prayed for her without leaving the elevated platform. She was instantly healed and began spontaneously to leap and dance for joy. He then asked all those who were sick and who desired to be healed to place their own hands on the afflicted place (if this was appropriate). He then prayed and afterwards it was reported that a large number were cured.” (Desmond Cartwright. ‘The Real Smith Wigglesworth’ Sovereign World. 2000)

I experienced this at a Wimber meeting some years ago. My Achilles heel on one foot had troubled me for a couple of years and I had resigned myself to living with it. As John Wimber prayed for around 4,000 people in the Brighton Centre I bent down and held my Achilles. I thought no more of it until days later I realised the pain had gone.

- Healing may be received while hearing the word of God.

Even when the preaching is nothing to do with healing! Dave Devenish recalls an incident from Southern Russia. On one of his first visits he preached on Ezekiel’s vision of the Valley of Dry Bones. Five years later, on a second visit to the same location, a woman came to him and asked if he had been the man who had preached on the Dry Bones. He said he was. She told him that she had been present but had been very ill with terminal cancer. As Dave preached she had felt the power of God touch her body and she was healed.

- Healing may be received in some unusual ways.

Back in 1973 I was immobilised by terrible back pain when a visiting pastor offered to pray for me. He and a bunch of men gathered round me, asked me to sit up straight and stretch out both my legs. He then announced that one leg was slightly longer than the other and this was probably the reason for the pain. *“Would you like prayer for this?”* he asked. *“Yes”*, I said somewhat nervously. I had never come across this before. *“Do you believe God can heal you?”* I said I did. They proceeded to pray, then started to whoop with delight and announced that my leg had grown. I have to admit feeling sceptical. But when I stood the pain had gone. I touched my toes and shouted for Liz who was upstairs. She was amazed, and so was I!

There are examples of unusual healings in the Gospels. A woman simply touched Jesus cloak and she was healed. With those who were blind Jesus used a wide variety of methods. Often he simply spoke a word or touched their eyes and they were healed. But on one occasion Jesus spat on the

ground and made mud with the dust and saliva and put it on a man's eyes and then told him to go and wash it off. (John 9v6f) On another occasion He actually "spat on the man's eyes". (Mark 8v23)

In 'Acts' we read of some extraordinary things happening with the apostles. For example in Jerusalem: *"More and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by."* (Acts 5v14f)

And strange things happened in Ephesus too. *"God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them."* (Acts 19v11f) When I first read this it conjured up images of Paul having a neat hankie in his top pocket like a smart suited Englishman, and his apron was what he used when washing the dishes. But Paul's handkerchiefs were more likely the sweatbands he used when doing his tent making, as were the aprons. Perhaps they just kept going missing from his workshop. Somehow faith was ignited through these means and healings resulted.

All these are remarkable, but we must be careful not to create a formula out of them. They are examples of God's breaking out of the box we like to put Him in. But if we were to go around touching people's clothes, rebuking their hay fever, spitting in their eyes, walking in their shadows or passing around used handkerchiefs it would turn us into a rather eccentric bunch.

Smith Wigglesworth used some very unusual methods to minister healing, many of which cannot be safely recommended as models to follow. This is an extract from a report on one of his meetings in the Marlborough Express newspaper in Australia from 10th December 1923. *"His method is rather remarkable for he stands on no ceremony. With coat removed he "laid hands" very violently indeed on the afflicted parts of the various people's anatomy while he called in stentorian tones on the evil spirits possessing them to come out, and in one case dealt a frail old lady such a smack in the stomach as might have doubled her up. His patients, however, stood up unflinchingly to his assaults, and in every case declared themselves improved in health by the encounter."*

But there are some less unusual ways to receive healing. In fact they almost have a formal feel about them.

- Healing may be received by calling the church elders.

This is what we are instructed to do in James 5v14: *"Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord"*. This is another way of exercising your faith muscles when you are sick – as indeed, it is for elders!

James asks *"Is any of you sick?"* Don't miss the obvious here: Christians do get sick. In much of the New Testament healings are signs of the Kingdom

pointing *unbelievers* to faith in Christ. But here the focus is on healing for *believers*. But what kind of sickness is in mind? In the text there are two different words used. In v14 it is "*astheneia*", used in the New Testament for a wide range of physical sickness and disability. In v15 is "*kamno*", literally "*to grow weary*" i.e. any malaise affecting your morale; sickness can cause you to lose heart and it saps your emotional energy. We can ask for prayer for anything disabling us physically or emotionally.

"He should call the elders of the church." There is so much here. First calling the elders means you belong to a church and know who your church elders are, and they know who you are. Second, calling the elders means you are asking for help: two extremes we all face are over-dependency on others and unwillingness to ask others for help. Third, calling the elders is a step of faith. Notice it is the sick person who is to take the initiative; they are exercising their faith muscles. Fourth calling the elders puts God back into the picture. In our Western culture doctors & medicine and surgery are people's only hope, although alternative medicine is also in vogue now.

"He should call the elders of the church to pray over him..." Praying over means the elders are actually present. Their physical presence should be, in itself, an encouragement. This is ministry to a person rather than a sickness. *"...and anoint him with oil..."* Derek Prince called this "an appointed act of faith by which the impartation of divine life and health through the Holy Spirit is claimed for the body of a sick Christian." *"in the name of the Lord."* It is not the oil that heals. It is not the elders. It is Jesus.

v15: *"And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up"*. Our experience doesn't yet match up 100% to this. Over the years I have seen people made well after calling the elders and others not. Once more it faces us with choices. Choice one: to judge Scripture by our experience or judge our experience by Scripture. Choice two: preserve our dignity at the expense of believing God's word, or risk looking foolish by continuing to press on believing God.

"If he has sinned, he will be forgiven." Please notice the "if" here! Sickness is not necessarily the outcome of sin. Nevertheless it *may be* caused by sin or healing *may be* blocked by sin. So, take it seriously. If you have any repenting to do or any forgiving to do – do it!

- Healing may be received when taking bread & wine.

Why might this be? Because taking the bread of wine is, in itself, a means of grace. It is a context in which God draws near to bless us.

I believe healing often comes at the Lord's Table because we are meditating on Christ's atoning death, and there is healing in the atonement. The prophecy of Isaiah 53v4,5 says: *"Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows....he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his*

wounds we are healed." By Christ's atoning death on the cross, not only is our sin dealt with but our physical healing is secured.

This is confirmed by Matthew 8v14-17: "*When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to Jesus, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. This was to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases."* Here, even before Jesus has died on the cross, this is said to be true!

How can this be? It is possible because Christ's death was an eternal offering for sin and sickness. Eternity stretches backwards as well as forwards. Because there is healing in the atonement, in the future we will be free from sickness, disability and disease. "*He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.*" He who was seated on the throne said, "*I am making everything new!*" (Revelation 21v4,5) But we should expect something of the "*then*" to break in "*now*". In any gift of healing we get a glorious foretaste of the future. But it is only a foretaste! Our human body still ages and finally gives out before we go to be with Christ and get our "*heavenly body*."

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Spiritual gifts, including healings, are expressions of God's grace. Therefore those who are healed receive an expression of God's grace. God Himself comes to us in His gifts. We encounter something of His glory.

But what about those who are not immediately healed? Or only partially healed? Or not healed at all? I believe that everyone who receives ministry when they are sick should experience the grace of God through that ministry. Even when someone is apparently not healed the experience should still leave them strengthened and built up.

Frank Gamble suffered a serious degenerative illness which progressed over a period of thirty years and eventually left him bent over in a wheelchair. He always welcomed prayer and believed God would heal him. But he never did get out of that wheelchair. Yet he could still write: "*Whenever Christians pray for me I feel loved, strengthened and comforted.*" He is now with the Lord and perfectly healed.

John Wilthew. July 2007