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Old Testament Roots

I can count on one hand the number of serious spiritual gift studies I have seen which build on a framework of OT teaching. I'm guessing neither Jeff nor Jane have ever seen any, unless they have been poking around the library in heavy resource texts that most Christians would not recognize or read.

Of course, the promised outpouring of the Spirit didn't happen until Pentecost. There are no references to "spiritual gifts" in the OT books. No lists of gifts experienced by the people of Israel. No instances of *charisma* in the ancient Greek version of the canonical OT. To be sure, there are examples of prophecy, miracles, leadership, and the like, which might enrich our understanding of some gifts. But do these even fall into the "spiritual gift" category in a NT sense? In the absence of clear references, most studies of the Spirit's gifts simply bypass the OT as irrelevant or only marginally helpful.

Then again, maybe we need to rethink what we mean by "clear references." This was my point at the end of the last chapter. In the Bible, the *concept* of Spirit-given capacity for ministry is not the same thing as the *expression* "spiritual gifts." The concept is presented to us in a variety of terms, and it has a number of dimensions. If we hope to gather insight on the Spirit's enabling for ministry from the OT, we will have much more success if we stop looking for lists or certain key words and focus our attention on important gift-related themes. Where does the Hebrew Bible speak of God *graciously giving* resources for ministry, of *diverse roles* and types of service *distributed* in God's wisdom and *empowered by God's Spirit*, for the *good* of God's people as an interconnected *community*?

I don't expect our review of OT teaching to produce a full-blown gift theology. We don't get a full-blown theology of the Holy Spirit or of the divine-human nature of Messiah from the OT, either. What the OT gives us for these and other theological themes are thought-provoking hints and embryonic concepts which prepare us for the fuller message that arrives with the ministry and teaching of Jesus. It is reasonable to expect something similar from our exploration of gift themes.

All the same, that exploration is important. Here as with other theological ideas, the OT provides categories that help us to understand the NT teaching. And because the NT authors were immersed in the message of the OT, sometimes their teaching assumes the message of the OT without spelling all the details out for us again. They intend for us to read their words against the OT background. We are not embarking on an frivolous detour in this chapter; we are considering the backdrop needed to do a really thorough and well-balanced study of the gifts in the NT.

I believe this is an important piece of our overall study. I am also conscious that in a very real sense, the task before us is impossible. The problem is not that there are no relevant passages and themes. The problem has to do with the over-abundance of material. In a perfect world we

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would make our way through the whole Hebrew Bible, following the arrangement familiar to Jesus and His disciples: Torah (Genesis to Deuteronomy), Prophets, and Writings. But this is a large, diverse body of literature. If your Bible study group wanted to cover it all by reading through one or two books a week, you would spend between 20 and 39 weeks just reading and discussing passages. That would be exhausting! There is simply too much material to cover in detail.

So, to make things more manageable, I'm going to provide you with a pre-digested summary of themes and passages that have turned up in my research. I will arrange the material in a logical sequence rather than following the Bible's order, using broad concepts for my headings. In each section I will identify some of the passages and verses that, in my mind, best capture the ideas we are discussing. It won't be possible to walk through the details of these passages; the best we can do in a short chapter is to comment on the big ideas that can be found in them.

This is not ideal. I am conscious that what I am going to present is necessarily selective, and that you will be far too dependent on *my* reading and summarizing. Still, an imperfect study of the OT material is better than none at all. To help you make the most of this chapter—especially if you are working in a group, let me suggest a few practical action steps.

1. *Make sure you read and briefly discuss at least one or two of the example passages I list in each section*. I'll highlight texts that seem especially important with italics. You may also want to give some attention to unexpected passages that you would not have previously associated with our topic. This will help you to be more personally engaged, creating the opportunity to reflect and draw your own conclusions.

   (A word of caution: many of these passages are connected to a variety of subjects, and they could lead you into a long digression that is unrelated to the Spirit's gifts. Unless you have unlimited time, stay focused on their connection to our subject matter.)

2. Some of you, like Jane, will be very familiar with the Bible's stories and teaching. If so, *as you work through each heading, spend a few moments thinking about other OT stories and passages that might also be relevant*. I do not claim that I have found them all! You may identify some additions that enrich your study, and the exercise will add to the sense of personal ownership of the material.

3. The authority over your theology is the Bible, not my book. To help reinforce this, and to deepen your engagement with the material, *pause before you finish each section and ask yourself whether there are points where you disagree with me, or where you think I might be misrepresenting or making too much of the passages I have introduced*. How might you present things differently if you were writing? Obviously I hope that you will find my research and summaries helpful and persuasive. But don't just take my word for everything here. Decide for yourself which ideas seem well-grounded and which might be less convincing.

Depending on your group's level of interest, your background knowledge, and your processing speed, this chapter might easily take several sessions. That's fine. The OT matters, and there is a lot to cover. At the same time, the most crucial material is still to come in subsequent chapters. Decide how much time you can invest in this section, make a plan, and stick with it. Too often Christians ignore the OT, which is unfortunate. It would be even more unfortunate to run out of energy before we get to Romans and 1 Corinthians!

With those suggestions in mind, let's launch into the OT material.

A. Key OT themes

(1) We are stewards of all the good gifts of life

This truth is eloquently summarized in James (1:17), where we are told that "Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above." The idea is much, much older. We see first footprints in the creation narrative in Genesis.

Read through ***Genesis 1-3*** in a sitting and a number of big ideas surface. God is a wise and good Creator who has made all things, and made them well. He plants human beings in His creation, fashioning them in His own image, bringing them to life with His breath/spirit (2:7—"breath" and "spirit" are the same Hebrew word). God blesses them and "*gives*" them dominion, with enjoyment of all the good things they need for an abundant life. This appears when they are first introduced in 1:27-30, when Adam is granted full access to the garden (2:15-16), and when God places the man and woman together (2:21-25).

God gives the human race His good world, not as a personal fiefdom in which they are absolute rulers, but as a stewardship where they live in communion and partnership with Him. The Image of God is more than simply a similarity; it involves acting as God's representatives. God creates, and calls human beings to procreate. God gives names to facets of His creation, and then calls Adam to continue the naming process. God fashions a garden, then appoints the man and woman to care for it as well as to enjoy it. That garden is not their personal property. Amid the many speculations and creative observations about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the relationship between eating the fruit and falling into sin, one thing stands very clear: God remains the owner of this garden, and He has the right to say which trees Adam and Eve can harvest and which they must leave alone. They are accountable to God for the things they have been given, and their disobedience can bring banishment. They are the image, not the original; they are stewards, not owners.

These themes flow through the following chapters in Genesis. Cast from the garden, the children of Adam and Eve continue to find provision in a fallen world. They procreate and demonstrate creativity as they develop tools, instruments, cities, and cultures. (See for example Gen 4:20-21, 10:10-11; 11:1-6.) Too often they also follow the example of their first parents' sin, seeking to build their own name and kingdoms rather than honoring their Maker, as seen vividly in the Babel story (11:1-6). They continue to enjoy many creation blessings and skills, but have a mixed record for remembering that they are stewards and not masters.

If we had unlimited time, we could follow the outward ripples of these themes through the whole OT. We are regularly reminded that God is Maker, and that He has given a world of good things for human beings and the rest of the living creation to enjoy. (See for example Ps 115:16; Jer 5:24, 14:22; Eccl 3:10-13, 5:19; Gen 30:20, 33:5; 1 Sam 1:11. ***Psalm 104*** is an especially good illustration.) We are also continually reminded that these good gifts imply a responsibility—that God blesses us so that we in turn can be a blessing. This is the note on which Abraham is introduced (***Gen 12:1-3***, compare 17:16), and it is woven throughout the Law as God's people are consistently called to share their blessings with neighbors and to be a light to the surrounding nations. Whenever they offer a portion of their produce back to God, it is a continual reminder that He is ultimate owner of their land and the good things they enjoy.

(2) God's gifts vary from person to person

The general blessings enjoyed by all human beings are good gifts from God. The OT also personalizes this principle, affirming that the good things individuals receive come from His hand. Scan over the stories of prominent OT heroes who enjoy God's favor—Joseph, Moses, Ruth, David, Daniel, Esther, and others—and you will hear again and again that the distinctive blessings each receives come from their Maker's hand.

This opens the door to one of the profound mysteries woven through the Scriptures: God is always good, but He does not bless everyone in exactly the same way, nor does everyone experience that goodness to the same degree at any given time. Some individuals enjoy long life, health, wealth, social status, children and posterity; other individuals are childless, they suffer health and financial challenges, and social disadvantage. Many individuals experience a mix of things: sometimes bounty and sometimes famine, difficulty interspersed with success.

To some degree, the OT associates prosperity with the reward for godliness, and infirmity with disobedience. This is affirmed in the blessings and curses of the Law, and acknowledge in poetry, proverb, and narrative. But it is not an absolute rule. Job suffered great trial in spite of his faithfulness. Joseph and Daniel both experienced difficulty as well as distinction, not as reward or punishment, but as phases in God's plan. God raises some to rule and blesses them because they have hearts to serve Him (as with David, or Hezekiah—see ***2 Chron 32:26-29***, especially v. 29), and He elevates others who have no interest in following Him (as with Nebuchudnezzar in Dan 2:37 or Cyrus in 2 Chron 36:23). Some of God's people will be kings, judges, and prophets; most will live ordinary lives. Some will have abundance and others will be poor—as reflected in many laws for right treatment of the poor and appropriate expectations for their offerings. (For example: Ex 22:25; Lev 14:21, 19:10, 23:22, 25:25ff; Deut 15:7-11.)

Ultimately, the good gifts each person receives come to us, not as things we have wrangled out of God through manipulation, as if He were one of the pagan deities, but as expressions of His goodness and grace. (See for example Ps 8, 16, 23, 40, 56, 61, 63, 65, ***84***, 91, 100, 103, 104, 107, and more.)

Here again, the principle of stewardship holds true. The Law and the Prophets are adamant that those who have much should not hoard their blessings to themselves, but open their hands to pass God's good gifts to others who have need. We can celebrate what God has given, and we should give in turn, each as we are able (see for e.g., ***Deut 16:10-17***).

(3) Salvation blessings are divine gifts

If we see grace at work in the general blessings of creation and the unique circumstances of individuals, it becomes all the more clear when we consider the blessings associated with God's plan of salvation. Naked after their fall and unable to clothe themselves adequately, Adam and Eve were covered by God's kind provision (Gen 3: 21). Abraham was called and blessed at God's initiative (***Gen 12:1-3***). Isaac was conceived and born through divine intervention, in spite of the best efforts of Abraham and Sarah to take things into their own hands. Joseph's surprising and meteoric rise to prominence was God's design, so that many people might be preserved through his leadership (***Gen 50:19-20***). In establishing Israel as a chosen people through whom the plan of redemption would be accomplished, God made it clear that it was His choice and not their worthiness that motivated this plan of action (***Deut 7:6-8***). David had a heart for God, but it was God's action that took David from the sheepfold to the palace, establishing the covenantal promise to bring a redeemer from the Davidic line (2 Sam 7:8-16; 1 Chron 17:7-14).

So then, we should not be surprised to find that many of the things God provided for Israel in their deliverance from Egypt and in their later experience of His redemptive plan are described as gifts—things God "gave" His people. In part, this "giving" language simply expresses the truth that good things were passed from God to others, as with the tablets of the Law given to Moses on Sinai (Ex 24:12). But often in the context it is clear that we are to see these things as expressions of God's mercy and kindness to an unworthy people—as is the case in ***Deut 4:1-8*** where the Law is described as a blessing set before Israel for their good. These good things are "gifts," not only because they are *given*, but because they are given *graciously*.

Examples could be multiplied, beginning with the exodus itself. God redeemed His people because He loved them and had compassion on them, and because of promises made to the patriarchs He had chosen. The Sabbath was explicitly described as His gift of rest and trust (Ex 16:29), as were the bread and meat God provided in the wilderness (Ex 16:8). The land of Canaan, which embodied multiple promises and blessings, was God's gift to His people. (This is perhaps the most common example of salvation-oriented gift language in the OT; see for example Gen 17:8 and Ex 20:12.) Peace in the land required victory over enemies and rest from warfare, also said to be gifts for this nation set apart to model God's blessing (Deut 12:10, 20:14; Judges 7:14; Ps 29:11; Neh 2:20, 12:43). Where good leaders emerged and the people came together with a heart to do what is right, this was God's gift as well (e.g., ***2 Chron 30:12***). Looking to the future, the hope for a New Covenant in which the Spirit would be poured out with a new heart for obedience was also framed in terms of what God would graciously give (***Jer 24:7***; Joel 2:18-29).

Small wonder that the Apostle Paul would look back at these many covenant blessings, graciously given so that Israel might experience and contribute to God's plan of salvation, and call them *charismata*—gifts of grace in Rom 11:29.

(4) God graciously appoints leaders for service

God created humankind for communion with Himself and for community with others. This is reflected in His plan of salvation, which unfolded from the family of Abraham into the nation of Israel. As a community-oriented plan, it meant that the blessings of salvation would

include the identification and equipping of leaders who would rally, teach, and guide the people. These leaders were appointed by God, and in a very real sense they were God's gifts to the group.

This pattern begins with Joseph, whose visions and eventual elevation were clearly God's doing and not his own. We see it in the call of Moses and in the priestly service of Aaron and his family. (Note that the sons of Levi are described as God's gift to Aaron, and thus to the people, to offer priestly service in the newfound covenant nation. See ***Num 18:6***. The Greek version of the OT also uses "distribution" language, similar to what we find in NT gift passages, to speak of worship-related roles in the OT. See 1 Chron 24:1, 26:1, 12, 19; 2 Chron 8:14, 35:5, 10; Ezra 6:18.) God will also select judges, prophets, and kings, whose appointment and ability is frequently described in terms of what God has established and "given." (See for example 1 Sam 1:11, 27; ***1 Kings 3:11-12***; Isa 8:18, 50:4.)

We are not told that these leaders have "spiritual gifts." But they are clearly selected and equipped by God to fulfill their calling within the community, and the people benefit from this provision of leadership.

(5) God empowers for ministry by the Spirit

Though spiritual gift language is absent, there is a consistent link between God's appointment of leaders and the empowering presence of His Spirit upon them.

Once again this begins with Joseph, who is recognized by Pharaoh as being enabled by a divine spirit (or a Spirit of God; ***Gen 41:38***). Moses is able to lead Israel because God's Spirit is "upon" him (Num 11:17), and God equips other elders to share in the leadership task by distributing the same Spirit upon them (***Num 11:10-30***). Joshua took up Moses' mantle of leadership in the power of that same Spirit (Num 27:18-23; Deut 34:9). Boldness and power rested on noteworthy judges—Othniel, Gideon, Jephthah, Samson—as the Spirit moved in them (Judg 3:10, 6:34, 11:29, 13:25). Prophets spoke by the Spirit and served in His power (e.g., 2 Kings 2:1-15; 2 Chron 15:1, 20:14, 24:20; Ezek 8:1, 11:5, 24, 27:1; Micah 3:8).

We tend to associate Spirit-anointed ministry primarily with the dramatic manifestations and accomplishments of Moses or Joshua or Elijah. However, we should not overlook the ordinary-looking leadership and teaching of the priests, who were symbolically anointed for service. It is also worth noting that the first reference to anyone being filled with the Spirit relates to Bezalel, who gave oversight to the construction of the Tabernacle (***Ex 31, 35-36***).

(6) Anointed leaders and a coming Anointed One

I have mentioned the symbolic anointing of priests, whose christening with oil reflected the conviction that God had called, separated, and purified these individuals for service (Ex 29-30, 40:13-15). This was paralleled by the anointing of kings, where the outpouring of oil was explicitly connected to the selection and equipping by God's Spirit (1 Sam 9:16-10:11; 1 Sam 16; 2 Sam 23:1-2). We read less about the anointing of prophets, though there are indications that a similar practice took place there as well, acknowledging the powerful presence of God's Spirit who brought the word of the Lord (1 Kings 19:16).

Symbolic anointing was to coincide with a real enablement and transformation by the Holy Spirit. Sadly, this was frequently undermined by the failure of good leaders and the wholesale apostacy of evil ones. In many respects, the OT story is one of unfulfilled potential and promises only partially accomplished. God delivered and raised up a nation, but that nation would fail and be exiled, returning only to a shadow of its former glory. He sent prophets, many of whom were abused and ignored. He established a priesthood, but worship was often nominal and perfunctory. He formed a line of Davidic kings, but only some were faithful, and in the end they preserved a lineage but lost the throne.

How could this happen? Did God's plan fail?

The pattern was anticipated in Deuteronomy (ch 29-30) and addressed directly in the writings of the prophets. In both cases the diagnosis was the same: Israel would fail to keep the covenant because they suffered from hard, un-transformed hearts. They would need God to circumcise their hearts (Deut 30:6) as part of a greater outpouring of the Spirit, marked by what Jeremiah would describe as the arrival of a New Covenant (***Jer 31:31-34***).

This outpouring of the Spirit was more than a need; it was a promise and a hope for the future. It would be accomplished as the result of the ministry of a future leader who would be anointed by the Spirit in a way that transcended and fulfilled the ministry of the priests, the prophets, and kings of Israel's covenant. This one would come from the Davidic line (***Isa 11:1-4, 42:1-3***), and would so completely embody the Spirit's presence that he would come to be called the Messiah—the Spirit-Anointed-One (so for example ***Isa 61:1-3***).

We tend to dismiss OT predictions of a coming Messiah as having little direct relevance to the matter of spiritual gifts. But this is shortsighted. Especially in Isaiah, the Messiah bears the name of God's Servant (see Isa 42:1-7, 49:1-7, 52:13-53:12). He is called to perform *ministry* for the good of God's people, in the power of the Spirit. And His ministry will, in turn, bring restoration to God's people (who are also God's "servant," as in Isa 51:8-10), allowing them to serve God's redemptive purpose as they ought.

(7) A wider outpouring of the Spirit to come

I have mentioned the promise of a wider outpouring of the Spirit on all God's people. This was Moses' desire (***Num 11:29***), though it did not characterize the life of God's people before Pentecost. It isn't a constant theme across the whole OT, but appears repeatedly in key prophetic texts: Isa 44:3; ***Ezek 11:19-20, 36:25-26*** (compare ***Jer 31:31-33***); ***Joel 2:28-29***. The emphasis in these texts is on the Spirit's work to transform hearts, rather than on distributed ministry. But of course, the every-member ministry which characterizes the NT church is made possible by the distribution of the Spirit on all.

The NT authors will make much of these promises, emphasizing that the post-Pentecost work of the Spirit on all believers is the lifeblood of the church's ministry, as well as the confirmation that Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah and that the gospel is what it claims to be. But of course, these are themes we will pick up in subsequent chapters.

B. Summing up

In the economy of the OT, a few anointed leaders were raised up by God to guide the people, to proclaim the truth, and to prepare the way for the Son of David. Terrified by God's manifest glory, Israel begged Moses to stand between them and their Lord as mediator while they remained at a distance; and that would be the pattern for subsequent generations (***see Ex 20:19***). In such a context, we can hardly expect to find a New Covenant concept of spiritual gifts distributed on all the people.

Yet a number of the essential ingredients for a gift theology do emerge. The general creation blessings we all enjoy, along with particular benefits unique to each individual, are granted at God's discretion and flow from His grace. Human beings are stewards of these gifts, accountable to use them under God's authority for the good of His Kingdom. This is also true of salvation and its benefits, blessings given out which God's servants are to share with others as a source of blessing. God raises up leaders and anoints them with power to serve by His Spirit. This has positive effects, but there is an overall sense of incompleteness which will only be satisfied in the future coming of a Messiah, a uniquely-anointed Servant whose ministry will bring changed hearts and an outpouring of the Spirit on the entire community.

How will all these ingredients come together, exactly? And when? These questions are not answered in the OT books. They are raised, however, and they leave us watching and waiting for time when all the pieces fall into place in explosive fulfillment. This will be a key theme in the next chapters.

Some questions to consider

1. How many of these themes were familiar to you before we started this project? Have you ever connected any of them to the NT teaching about the Spirit's gifts equipping us for ministry? If so, what ideas were shared?

2. A person like the Apostle Paul, who knew the Hebrew Scriptures well, would certainly recognize all these themes. How do you think Paul's theology of the Spirit's gifts might be informed or influenced by these themes from the OT?

3. Are there ways in which your own understanding of the Spirit's gifts might be reinforced or enriched when you think about the NT message against this OT background?