

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

PNEUMATOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit

UNIT 8: THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT — A CESSATIONIST THEOLOGY

Lesson 24

Tongues, Prophecy, and Healing A Careful Examination

What the New Testament Actually Teaches About the Controversial Gifts

Key Texts: Acts 2:4–11; 1 Corinthians 14:1–40; James 5:14–16; 2 Corinthians 12:7–9; 2 Timothy 4:20

“Deceive Them No Longer: What the New Testament Texts Say When Read Carefully”

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Series Verse

*“But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes,
He will guide you into all the truth;
for He will not speak on His own initiative,
but whatever He hears, He will speak;
and He will disclose to you what is to come.”*

John 16:13, NASB 1995

Introduction

Lesson 23 established the cessationist case through five cumulative lines of argument: the Purposes, Foundational, Sufficiency, Historical, and Canonical arguments together establish that the extraordinary sign and revelatory gifts of the apostolic era served a specific, bounded redemptive-historical purpose that has been fulfilled with the close of the apostolic canon. Lesson 24 now undertakes the complementary task of careful exegetical examination: examining the three most debated extraordinary gifts, tongues, prophecy, and healing, in the actual New Testament texts that describe them, to show what those texts actually say rather than what the popular Charismatic reading of them assumes they say.

This lesson is, in its way, the most practically important lesson of Unit 8, because it is the lesson that most directly engages the pastoral and personal dimension of the gift-debate. The people most affected by the question of the extraordinary gifts are not the theologians who debate cessationism in academic journals but the millions of sincere believers who have sought the gift of tongues and not received it; who have had hands laid on them for healing and have remained ill; who have received a “prophecy” that proved false but were told that their failure to believe it was itself the reason for its failure; and who have been told, in one form or another, that their failure to experience the extraordinary gifts is evidence of their spiritual insufficiency or their inadequate faith. These are the pastoral casualties of the misreading of the New Testament texts, and this lesson is written for their sake as much as for the theological precision of those who are simply trying to understand what the Bible actually teaches.

The lesson will examine each of the three gifts in turn. For tongues: what was the Pentecost phenomenon, what was its redemptive-historical purpose, what was the Corinthian situation, and what does the New Testament’s careful examination yield? For prophecy: how does the New Testament use the word, what is the distinction between foundational revelatory prophecy and Spirit-illuminated preaching, and what does the Agabus question reveal about the nature of New Testament prophecy? For healing: how did Jesus and the apostles heal, what is the normative New Testament picture of sickness and death among believers, and what does the pastoral clarity about sovereign healing and the cessation of the apostolic healing gift look like in practice? And the lesson will close with the pastoral warning about the danger of false claims, the specific harm done when extraordinary gifts are claimed without the extraordinary evidence that would authenticate them.

I. Tongues, What the New Testament Actually Teaches

Real Languages, a Redemptive Sign, a Corinthian Problem

A. The Nature of the Tongues Gift: Actual Human Languages

The most fundamental exegetical point about the gift of tongues is the one most commonly overlooked in popular treatments: the New Testament's primary description of the tongues gift is not ecstatic utterance in an unknown, heavenly, or angelic language but the miraculous ability to speak in actual, identifiable human languages not previously learned. Acts 2:4–6 is the primary and most descriptive account: "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance. Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven. And when this sound occurred, the crowd came together, and were bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language" (NASB 1995).

The linguistic reality of Acts 2 is unambiguous: the tongues being spoken were real human languages identifiable by their native speakers. Verse 8 ("And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born?") and verses 9–11 (listing the specific nations and languages represented) establish that what was being heard was not generic religious ecstasy but specific, intelligible speech in specific, identifiable human languages. Parthians heard Parthian; Medes heard Median; Elamites heard Elamite. The gift of tongues at Pentecost was xenolalia, the speaking of foreign languages, not glossolalia in the modern Charismatic sense of ecstatic non-cognitive utterance.

The modern Charismatic practice of tongues as a private, ecstatic, non-cognitive utterance, the kind of tongues that no native speaker identifies as their language, that requires special interpretation even in principle, and that functions primarily as a private devotional practice, is a fundamentally different phenomenon from the Acts 2 gift. The question is whether the 1 Corinthians 12–14 tongues are the same gift as the Acts 2 tongues or a different one. Even if one grants (as some cessationists do) that the Corinthian tongues may have involved some form of ecstatic utterance, the redemptive-historical significance and purpose of the gift remain the same: it was a sign to Israel, it was bounded by the apostolic era, and it has fulfilled its purpose.

B. The Purpose of Tongues: A Sign to Unbelieving Israel

The purpose of the tongues gift is established with remarkable clarity in 1 Corinthians 14:21–22, where Paul draws on Isaiah 28:11–12: "In the Law it is written, 'By men of strange tongues and by the lips of strangers I will speak to this people, and even so they will not listen to Me,' says the Lord. So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophecy is for a sign, not to unbelievers but to those who believe" (NASB 1995). The Isaiah 28:11–12 context is crucial: God was warning Israel that because they had refused to hear His Word spoken through the prophets, He would speak to them through the strange tongues of foreign nations, the Assyrian invaders, as a sign of His judgment and the extension of His purposes to the nations beyond Israel's borders.

Paul's application to the New Covenant gift of tongues is the key to understanding the gift's redemptive-historical function: tongues were a sign to unbelieving Israel that the covenant blessings were being extended to the Gentile nations, that the era of covenant exclusivity was ending and the era of Gentile inclusion was beginning. When Gentiles spoke in tongues, it was God's declaration to Israel that the Spirit's outpouring was not confined to the covenant nation but was now available to every people, language, tribe, and nation. This is why the Cornelius narrative (Acts 10:44–48) is so significant: when Cornelius and his household spoke in tongues, Peter's response was not "They have received a special spiritual empowerment" but "Can anyone refuse the water for these to be baptized, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did?" (v. 47). The tongues functioned as the sign that convinced the Jewish believers that Gentile inclusion was genuine.

The redemptive-historical purpose of tongues, as a sign to Israel of the covenant's extension to the nations, is precisely the kind of purpose that is inherently bounded. Once the transition from the Old Covenant's Jewish exclusivity to the New Covenant's Gentile inclusion had been accomplished and authenticated, the sign that marked that transition was no longer needed for its original purpose. The transition was complete; the Gentiles were in; the church's universal character had been established. Tongues as a sign to Israel of this transition had served its purpose and, consistent with the Purposes argument of Lesson 23, was no longer necessary in the same way.

C. The Corinthian Situation: Abuse, Regulation, and Paul's Corrective

First Corinthians 12–14 addresses the Corinthian community's specific pathological relationship to the tongues gift, a relationship characterized by pride, disorder, and the elevation of the spectacular gift above the edifying gift. Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 14 are not endorsements of the tongues practice as the normal, ongoing, Spirit-filled life of every New Covenant church; they are regulations of a specific gift in a specific community that was misusing it in ways that were disrupting the community's worship and producing spiritual pride rather than spiritual edification.

The specific regulations Paul imposes, at most two or three speakers (v. 27), only in turn (v. 27), only if an interpreter is present (v. 28), and the instruction that women are to maintain decorum in the assembly (vv. 34–35), are the corrective instructions of an apostle who is not enthusing about the gift's value but establishing the conditions under which a disruptive gift might at least be orderly and potentially edifying. The thrust of the entire chapter is the relative subordination of tongues to prophecy: "I wish that you all spoke in tongues, but even more that you would prophesy; for greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may receive edifying" (v. 5). Paul is not arguing that tongues are the pinnacle of the Spirit's gifts; he is arguing that the Corinthians have over-valued them and that prophecy (intelligible, edifying communication of divine truth) is the greater gift for the community's benefit.

II. Prophecy, The Crucial Distinctions

Foundational Revelation vs. Spirit-Illuminated Proclamation

A. The Spectrum of Prophetic Language in the New Testament

The word “prophecy” (Greek: *prophēteia*; verb: *prophēteuō*) is used across a spectrum of meanings in the New Testament, and the cessationist’s argument is precisely that this spectrum requires a careful distinction between the gift’s different expressions rather than a wholesale claim that all prophecy in all its forms has ceased. The failure to make this distinction is responsible for some of the most significant confusions in both the cessationist and continuationist positions.

At one end of the spectrum is foundational, revelatory prophecy: the Spirit’s direct communication of specific, previously unknown divine revelation through a human instrument, the revelation of new doctrinal content, predictive prophecy with specific historical fulfillment, or specific divine directives that carry binding authority for the community. This is the prophecy of the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostolic community, through which the canonical revelation was delivered. This is the prophecy associated with the foundational apostles and prophets of Ephesians 2:20, and this is the prophecy whose cessation the cessationist most directly argues.

At the other end of the spectrum is what has been called “forth-telling”, the Spirit-illuminated, Word-grounded, faith-applying proclamation of the already-delivered revelation of Scripture. In this broader sense, every Spirit-empowered proclamation of the Word has a prophetic character: it applies the truth of God’s Word to the specific situation of the specific community with the Spirit’s own urgency and authority, not by adding to the Word but by declaring what the Word already says in a manner that the Spirit makes directly applicable and personally confronting. This broader prophetic function, the bold, Spirit-empowered proclamation of the Word, continues in the Spirit-gifted preaching and teaching of the church in every generation and is a form of Spirit-filled ministry that the cessationist enthusiastically affirms.

B. The Agabus Question: New Testament Prophets and Accuracy

The Agabus narratives in Acts 11:27–28 and Acts 21:10–11 raise the important exegetical question of whether New Testament prophets were sometimes inaccurate in their predictions, and what this implies for the nature of the gift. In Acts 11:27–28, Agabus predicted a great famine over the entire world, and the text notes that it occurred in the time of Claudius, confirming his prediction. In Acts 21:10–11, Agabus predicted that Paul would be bound by the Jews in Jerusalem and handed over to the Gentiles, enacting the prophecy symbolically with Paul’s belt and declaring it in the name of the Holy Spirit.

Wayne Grudem and other continuationist scholars have argued that the Acts 21 prophecy was imprecise: Paul was not bound by the Jews but by the Romans (v. 33), and he was not delivered to the Gentiles by the Jews but rescued from the Jews by the Gentiles. Grudem uses this alleged imprecision to argue for a category of “fallible prophecy” in the New Testament that is distinguishable from the infallible canonical prophecy of the Old Testament prophets, and that continues today. The cessationist response is to reject the claim of imprecision: the Acts 21

prophecy was accurately fulfilled. Paul was indeed bound (Romans did the binding, but the Jews were the cause, v. 27–36); he was indeed handed over to Gentiles (the Jewish mob that was trying to kill him was restrained by the Roman commander who took Paul into protective custody). The prophecy was accurate; the alleged imprecision depends on reading the prophecy more literally than the fulfillment details require. A standard consistent with Old Testament prophetic standards (Deuteronomy 18:21–22) was met.

“Each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language” | “Tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers” | “The thorn in the flesh was given to me... He has said to me, My grace is sufficient for you”

Acts 2:6; 1 Corinthians 14:22; 2 Corinthians 12:7, 9, NASB 1995

III. Healing, The Apostolic Gift and Sovereign Providence

What the New Testament Actually Shows

A. Healing in the Ministry of Jesus and the Apostles

Jesus’ healing ministry was unmistakable in its character: immediate, complete, public, and undeniable. He healed “all who came to Him” (Luke 4:40; Matthew 8:16). He healed on demand, in public, in ways that were verifiable by skeptics and enemies as well as by disciples. He healed the lame, the blind, the deaf, the lepers, and the dead, not occasionally, not with mixed results, not with explanations when the healing failed. The apostolic healing ministry shared these characteristics: the healing of the lame man at the Beautiful Gate (Acts 3:1–10) was immediate, complete, and publicly undeniable; the healing ministries of Peter and Paul produced results that convinced even committed opponents.

This character of apostolic healing, immediate, complete, publicly verifiable, undeniably miraculous, is the standard against which the cessationist evaluates contemporary claims of a healing gift. The purpose of these healings was consistent with the Purposes argument of Lesson 23: they were signs authenticating the apostolic message, demonstrations of the inaugurated kingdom, and public testimonies to the divine authority behind the proclamation. When the apostolic healing gift is described and when its purpose is identified, its extraordinary character is part of its definition; a “healing gift” that produces ambiguous results, occasional partial recoveries, and frequent failures is not the gift described in the New Testament.

B. The Normative New Testament Picture: Sickness, Suffering, and Death

The most important single piece of evidence against the claim that the apostolic healing gift continues in the present age is the New Testament’s own consistent presentation of sickness, suffering, and death as normative experiences for believers, including Spirit-filled believers in the apostolic circle. This evidence has been almost entirely overlooked or minimized in popular Charismatic presentations of the healing gift, but it is exegetically decisive.

Second Timothy 4:20: “Erastus remained at Corinth, but Trophimus I left sick at Miletus.” Paul, the apostle through whom God performed extraordinary miracles (Acts 19:11–12), left his

companion Trophimus sick at Miletus. If the apostolic healing gift were available and operative, the most obvious pastoral application would have been to heal Trophimus. Instead, Paul left him sick. The text's matter-of-fact tone, not a note of apology, not an explanation of why healing was withheld, not a suggestion that Trophimus's faith was inadequate, is itself significant: leaving a sick companion was apparently an unremarkable occurrence within the apostolic circle.

Philippians 2:25–27: Epaphroditus, Paul's co-worker and the Philippians' messenger, "was sick to the point of death" (v. 27). Paul attributes his recovery not to an act of apostolic healing but to divine mercy: "But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, so that I would not have sorrow upon sorrow." God's merciful providence healed Epaphroditus; Paul's apostolic healing gift is not deployed. Paul's relief at Epaphroditus's recovery, he says he would have had "sorrow upon sorrow" had Epaphroditus died, implies that the prospect of his death was a genuine concern, not a circumstance Paul expected to resolve by exercising the healing gift.

Second Corinthians 12:7–9 is the most personally revealing of the three passages: Paul himself, the apostle through whom God performed extraordinary miracles, was given "a thorn in the flesh", some form of physical suffering, most plausibly a chronic illness or disability of some kind. Paul prayed three times for its removal; God's answer was not healing but the assurance of sufficient grace: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness" (v. 9). If the apostolic healing gift were available to Paul for his own use, the obvious solution to his thorn would have been self-healing, or the healing by one of his colleagues. Instead, Paul endured the thorn and found God's grace sufficient within it. The normative New Testament picture of the believer's relationship to suffering is the picture of 2 Corinthians 12: not healing on demand but the grace of God's sufficient presence within the suffering that cannot be immediately removed.

C. Pastoral Clarity: Sovereign Healing and the Apostolic Gift

The pastoral clarity that the New Testament's witness demands distinguishes two things that popular Christian discourse often conflates: God's sovereign healing in response to prayer, and the apostolic gift of miraculous healing. The cessationist affirms the former without qualification; the cessationist denies the continuation of the latter. James 5:14–16 establishes the New Covenant pattern of healing prayer: "Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed."

The James 5 pattern is the New Covenant model: corporate prayer by the church's elders, offered in faith, for the healing of the sick, and the assurance that God hears and answers such prayers. This is not the apostolic healing gift (an immediate, on-demand, publicly verifiable miracle); it is the prayer of faith that asks God to heal in His own sovereign timing and manner. God can and does heal in response to the prayer of faith; the cessationist prays for healing with genuine faith and genuine expectation that God may choose to heal. What the cessationist

denies is that any contemporary Christian possesses the apostolic ability to perform miraculous healings on demand, with the immediate, complete, publicly verifiable results that characterized Jesus' and the apostles' healing ministry.

IV. The Danger of False Claims

Confusion, Manipulation, and the Shipwreck of Faith

The pastoral weight of this lesson's material is concentrated in this final section: the specific, devastating harm done when extraordinary gifts are claimed without the extraordinary evidence that would authenticate them. This is not an abstract theological concern; it is the pastoral catastrophe that this series has been built, in part, to address and to prevent. The millions of believers who have been damaged by false claims about the extraordinary gifts constitute the most pressing practical argument for the careful exegetical work that Lessons 21–24 have undertaken.

The harm of false tongues claims is primarily the harm of a two-tier pneumatological system: the believer who has sought the gift of tongues and not received it is told, in one form or another, that his failure to receive the gift is evidence of spiritual inadequacy, insufficient faith, insufficient yieldedness, insufficient prayer, insufficient sincerity. This is the pastoral harm of the subsequent doctrine identified in Lesson 17: the creation of a spiritual anxiety in genuinely regenerate, genuinely Spirit-indwelt believers that their Christianity is somehow incomplete, less than the fullness available to the truly Spirit-empowered, because they have not had the specific experience that the tradition identifies as the evidence of Spirit-fullness.

The harm of false prophecy is more severe, because it involves direct claims to divine authority. When a "prophet" in a contemporary Charismatic setting delivers a "word from the Lord" that proves false, the community faces a theological crisis: either the prophet was not hearing from the Lord (which raises the question of whether the gift is genuine), or the recipient's failure to believe or act on the prophecy prevented its fulfillment (which shifts responsibility for the false prophecy from the prophet to the recipient). The latter is the more common pastoral resolution in Charismatic communities, and it is among the most destructive: it creates believers who feel personally responsible for the non-fulfillment of prophecies that were never genuinely from God and who carry the spiritual burden of having "failed" to receive what God "said."

The harm of false healing claims is the most physically and spiritually devastating of the three. The believer who has been told that her faith is sufficient to receive healing, who has had hands laid on her in front of the congregation, who has been instructed to "claim" the healing and to confess the healing even before it is visible, and who then remains chronically ill, or whose child dies despite the healing service, is the pastoral casualty of the false healing claim. The theological framework that supported the false claim (healing is God's universal will for all believers; the failure to be healed is a failure of faith) now turns against the sufferer: she was not healed because her faith was not sufficient; the child died because the parents' faith failed. This is the shipwreck of faith that the misreading of the healing gift's New Testament character has produced in countless sincere, suffering believers, and it is the pastoral concern that makes this series' careful exegetical work more than an academic exercise.

V. The Affirmative Vision: The Spirit Still Works Powerfully

What the Cessationist Celebrates

Lest this lesson be read as primarily negative, as a series of refusals and denials, it must close with the affirmative vision that the cessationist position genuinely holds and genuinely celebrates. The cessation of the extraordinary gifts is not the diminishment of the Spirit's work; it is the completion of the Spirit's authenticating work in service of a more permanent and more comprehensive provision for the church's needs. The Spirit who no longer speaks through tongues as a sign to Israel speaks through the completed Word in every human language. The Spirit who authenticated the apostolic message through miraculous healings now authenticates the apostolic message through the continued proclamation of the gospel that transforms lives, renews communities, and advances the kingdom through the ordinary gifts of every generation.

The cessationist's affirmation is comprehensive and enthusiastic: the Spirit still regenerates the spiritually dead; He still indwells every genuine believer permanently and completely; He still seals every believer for the day of redemption; He still produces the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, in every believer who walks by the Spirit; He still empowers the Word's preaching to convict, illuminate, and transform; He still calls, equips, and empowers the continuing gifts of teaching, evangelism, pastoral care, giving, mercy, administration, and exhortation; and He still sovereignly answers the prayer of faith with healing, provision, and guidance in ways that exceed natural expectation. None of this is diminished, reduced, or absent. The Spirit is fully present, fully active, and fully sufficient for the church's permanent mission.

The Word that the extraordinary gifts authenticated is now the church's permanent possession, the fully sufficient, completely reliable, Spirit-empowered Scripture that teaches, rebukes, corrects, and trains in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16–17). The Spirit who produced the Word now illuminates the Word; the Spirit who authenticated the apostolic message now applies the apostolic message through every Spirit-gifted preacher and teacher in every generation. The cessationist who has understood what has been completed and what has been given is not a Christian who has been deprived; he is a Christian who has inherited the full weight of two thousand years of Spirit-empowered gospel proclamation, and who has been equipped with the ordinary gifts that the Spirit has provided for the continuation of that proclamation until the return of the One who sent the Spirit at Pentecost and who will bring the Spirit's work to its perfect eschatological completion at His return.

VI. Pastoral Clarity for Hurting People

What to Say to Those Damaged by False Claims

The pastoral clarity that the careful exegesis of Lessons 21–24 provides is most urgently needed by the specific people described at the outset of this lesson: those who have sought the extraordinary gifts and not received them, those who have been told that their suffering is the result of insufficient faith, and those whose spiritual experience has been shaped by a pneumatological framework that the New Testament’s careful reading does not support. The following pastoral statements are addressed directly to those people.

To the person who has sought tongues and not received them: you are not spiritually deficient. The Spirit’s indwelling, not the gift of tongues, is the universal mark of genuine faith (Romans 8:9; Lesson 15). The gift of tongues was given for a specific, redemptive-historical purpose that has been fulfilled. The absence of tongues in your experience is not evidence of the absence of the Spirit; it is consistent with the Spirit’s sovereign distribution of gifts (1 Corinthians 12:11) and with the cessation of the tongue gift’s specific redemptive-historical function. You are Spirit-indwelt, Spirit-sealed, Spirit-baptized, and fully equipped for the Christian life by the gifts the Spirit has sovereignly given you.

To the person who has been told that their sickness is the result of insufficient faith: the New Testament’s picture of sickness among believers, Trophimus left sick, Epaphroditus sick to the point of death, Paul with an unhealed thorn, refutes the theology that makes healing the universal will of God for all believers in the present age. God can and does heal in response to the prayer of faith (James 5:14–16); He is not obligated to heal every believer who prays with sufficient faith. Suffering is, in the New Testament’s own testimony, part of the normative Christian experience through which God accomplishes His purposes of sanctification, Christlike formation, and eschatological glory (Romans 8:17–18; 2 Corinthians 4:17). The one who endures sickness with the faith that trusts God’s sovereign goodness, even when healing does not come, is not a Christian with insufficient faith; he is a Christian who is walking the same road that Paul walked when he heard “My grace is sufficient for you.”

To the person whose faith has been shipwrecked by a false prophecy: the test of a true prophet is not whether he claims divine authority but whether his words come to pass (Deuteronomy 18:21–22). A prophecy that proves false was not from God, regardless of the authority or the confidence with which it was delivered. The responsibility for a false prophecy lies entirely with the prophet who delivered it, not with the recipient who failed to believe it. And the God who did not speak through the false prophet has not withdrawn His guidance from you: He speaks through the completed Scripture, through the Spirit’s illumination of the Word, through the counsel of the Spirit-gifted community, and through the ordinary means of wisdom and prayer. His voice is not less accessible because the extraordinary gift was abused; His provision for your guidance is fully sufficient in the ordinary means He has ordained.

VII. A Summary of the Careful Exegetical Findings

What the Texts Say When Read Carefully

Tongues in the New Testament are real human languages (xenolalia), given as a sign to Israel of the covenant's extension to the nations (1 Corinthians 14:21–22; Isaiah 28:11–12), regulated by Paul in Corinth because the gift was being misused for spiritual self-display rather than community edification, and bounded by the redemptive-historical purpose of authenticating the apostolic message to a specific audience. The modern Charismatic practice of tongues as private devotional ecstatic utterance differs materially from the Acts 2 gift in its character, its purpose, and its public intelligibility.

Prophecy in the New Testament encompasses a spectrum from foundational, authoritative, canonical revelation (which ceased with the close of the apostolic era) to Spirit-illuminated, Word-grounded proclamation (which continues in Spirit-empowered preaching and teaching). The Agabus narratives are accurately fulfilled rather than imprecisely fulfilled; the “fallible prophecy” category proposed by continuationist scholars is not supported by the specific Agabus texts when read carefully. The cessationist affirms the continuation of the broader prophetic function (Spirit-empowered proclamation of the Word) while denying the continuation of the foundational, revelatory function.

Healing in the ministry of Jesus and the apostles was immediate, complete, publicly verifiable, and functioned as a sign of the inaugurated kingdom and an authentication of the apostolic message. The normative New Testament picture of believers' experience with sickness, Trophimus left ill, Epaphroditus nearly dead, Paul with an unhealed thorn, is incompatible with the claim that healing on demand is the universal will of God for believing Christians in the present age. The cessationist affirms sovereign healing in response to the prayer of faith (James 5:14–16) while denying the continuation of the apostolic gift of miraculous healing on demand.

*“My grace is sufficient for you,
for power is perfected in weakness.
Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast
about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ
may dwell in me.”*

2 Corinthians 12:9, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Xenolalia	The speaking of actual human languages (xenos, foreign; lalia, speech) not previously learned by the speaker. The character of the tongues gift as described in Acts 2:4–11, where the audience “was bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language” and specific national languages were identified (vv. 9–11). Distinguished from glossolalia in the modern Charismatic sense of ecstatic, non-cognitive utterance that no native speaker identifies as their language. The cessationist argues that Acts 2 establishes xenolalia as the normative character of the tongues gift; the Corinthian tongues, while perhaps less formal, served the same redemptive-historical sign function and shared the same fundamental character as intelligible speech in identifiable human languages.
Sign to Unbelievers	The purpose of the tongues gift as established in 1 Corinthians 14:21–22, drawing on Isaiah 28:11–12: “Tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers.” The specific unbelievers in view are Jewish unbelievers, consistent with the Isaiah 28 context (God speaking to Israel through the strange tongues of foreign nations). Tongues functioned as a sign to Israel that the covenant’s blessings were being extended to the Gentile nations, a redemptive-historical message that the transition from the Old Covenant’s Jewish exclusivity to the New Covenant’s universal inclusion was underway. Once the transition was complete and authenticated, the sign that marked it had fulfilled its purpose.
Foundational Revelatory Prophecy	The Spirit’s direct communication of specific, previously unknown divine revelation through a human instrument, delivered with divine authority equivalent to canonical Scripture. Exercised by the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostolic community in the delivery and inscripturation of the canonical revelation. Associated with the foundational apostles and prophets of Ephesians 2:20. Distinguished from the broader prophetic function of Spirit-illuminated proclamation of the already-delivered Word. The cessationist argument: foundational revelatory prophecy served a specific, bounded purpose that was completed with the close of the apostolic canon; the gifts that served this function have fulfilled their purpose.
Fallible Prophecy	The continuationist category (developed primarily by Wayne Grudem) proposing that New Testament prophecy was a distinct, lower-authority phenomenon from Old Testament prophecy, genuinely from the Spirit but not infallible, potentially inaccurate in details, and therefore not challenging the sufficiency of the canonical Scripture when it continues today. Based partly on the alleged imprecision of the Agabus prophecy in Acts 21:10–11. The cessationist critique: (1) the Agabus prophecy is accurately fulfilled, not

Term	Definition
	imprecise; (2) the Old Testament standard for genuine prophecy (Deuteronomy 18:21–22) does not admit of a category of divinely given but fallible prophecy; (3) the pastoral implications of “fallible” claims to divine authority are severe.
Apostolic Healing Gift	The extraordinary ability of Jesus and the apostles to heal sickness immediately, completely, and publicly, as a sign of the inaugurated kingdom and an authentication of the apostolic message. Characterized by immediacy (no delayed effects), completeness (no partial healings), and public verifiability (healings were undeniable even to opponents). Distinguished from God’s sovereign healing in response to the prayer of faith (James 5:14–16), which the cessationist affirms as continuing. The cessationist denies the continuation of the apostolic healing gift on the grounds that the gift’s purpose (kingdom sign and apostolic authentication) has been fulfilled, and that the normative New Testament picture of sickness among believers (Trophimus, Epaphroditus, Paul’s thorn) is incompatible with on-demand miraculous healing as a continuing gift.
The Thorn in the Flesh	Paul’s reference in 2 Corinthians 12:7–9 to an unspecified physical suffering (“a thorn in the flesh”) that he prayed three times to have removed. God’s answer was not healing but the assurance of sufficient grace: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Theologically significant for the cessationist argument against the continuation of the apostolic healing gift: Paul, the apostle through whom God performed extraordinary miracles, endured chronic unhealed suffering and was told that grace within suffering was God’s answer to his prayer. The thorn establishes that even for the most spiritually gifted believer in the apostolic era, healing on demand was not available, and suffering was the context within which God’s power was perfected.
Sovereign Healing	God’s work of restoring health to the sick in response to the prayer of faith, in His own sovereign timing and manner, without the immediate and verifiable character of apostolic miraculous healing. The continuing New Covenant pattern of healing prayer described in James 5:14–16: elders pray over the sick, anointing with oil; the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick; the Lord will raise him up. The cessationist affirms sovereign healing without qualification: God can and does heal in response to prayer; He is not constrained to heal every believer who prays with faith. Distinguished from the apostolic healing gift by its dependence on God’s sovereign will rather than the gift-bearer’s immediate, on-demand capacity.
Forth-telling	The broader prophetic function of Spirit-empowered proclamation of the already-delivered revelation of Scripture, as distinguished from the narrower function of delivering new, extracanonical divine revelation (fore-telling in the predictive sense or receiving new divine content). The continuing expression of the prophetic calling: every Spirit-gifted preacher who opens the Word and applies it to the specific situation of the specific

Term	Definition
	community with the Spirit's own urgency and authority is exercising a forth-telling prophetic function. The cessationist affirms the continuation of forth-telling while denying the continuation of new revelatory delivery; the two represent different points on the spectrum of New Testament prophetic language.
Shipwreck of Faith	The pastoral devastation produced when extraordinary gifts are claimed without the extraordinary evidence that authenticates them, leaving sincere believers spiritually confused, manipulated, and abandoned by a theological framework that has failed them. Specifically: the person who seeks tongues and is told her failure to receive them evidences spiritual deficiency; the person whose healing prayer is not answered and is told his insufficient faith is responsible; the person whose faith is built on a prophecy that proves false and is told she caused its failure by not believing it. The cessationist's pastoral concern: the careful exegetical work of establishing what the New Testament actually teaches about the extraordinary gifts is not an academic exercise but an act of pastoral care for those whose faith has been damaged by the misreading of those texts.
My Grace Is Sufficient	God's response to Paul's prayer for healing in 2 Corinthians 12:9: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." The paradigmatic New Testament statement of God's will for the believer who endures unhealed suffering: not the miraculous removal of the suffering but the sufficient provision of God's grace within it. Paul's response to this word establishes the Christian theology of suffering: "Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me." The suffering that God does not heal is the suffering that becomes the occasion for the demonstration of the power of Christ perfected in human weakness.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: *What Must We Believe?*

We must believe, with specific exegetical grounding, that the tongues of the New Testament were real human languages (Acts 2:4–11), that their purpose was a sign to unbelieving Israel of the covenant’s extension to the nations (1 Corinthians 14:21–22), and that their Corinthian expression was an occasion for apostolic regulation and correction rather than apostolic endorsement and promotion. We must believe that the apostolic healing gift was characterized by immediacy, completeness, and public verifiability, a standard that contemporary healing claims typically do not meet, and that the normative New Testament picture of believers’ experience with sickness is incompatible with a theology of universal healing on demand.

We must also believe, with equal clarity and greater pastoral warmth, that God heals sovereignly in response to the prayer of faith; that the Spirit’s work in the post-apostolic church is fully present and fully sufficient; that the completed Scripture is the fully adequate rule of faith and practice for every dimension of the Christian life; and that the believer who endures unhealed suffering, who has not spoken in tongues, and who has never received a prophecy is not a spiritually deficient Christian but a fully Spirit-indwelt, Spirit-sealed, Spirit-gifted child of God, living in the ordinary means of grace that the Spirit has provided for the church’s permanent life.

B. For the Heart: *What Must We Feel and Desire?*

Let the pastoral section of this lesson produce in you the specific compassion for those who have been damaged by false claims that the lesson is written to express. The shipwreck of faith is not an abstract theological category; it is a specific person you may know, a person who sought tongues and was made to feel spiritually inferior; a person whose healing was not granted and whose theology told them the fault was their own; a person whose community’s prophecies proved false and who was blamed for their failure. These are real people with real wounds, and the careful exegetical work of this series is addressed to them with the pastoral care of the shepherd who knows that false theology can wound as surely as false ethics.

Desire to be a person who can hold the cessationist convictions about the extraordinary gifts with the specific pastoral care for those on the wrong side of those convictions that the 1 Corinthians 13 love standard demands. The cessationist who holds his theological positions with correctness but without compassion for the suffering that false versions of those positions have produced is exhibiting the pneumatological failure that this entire series has consistently warned against: the knowledge that puffs up without the love that builds up (1 Corinthians 8:1).

C. For the Hands: *What Must We Do?*

- Read Acts 2:1–11 carefully and note every piece of evidence that the tongues at Pentecost were actual human languages: the listing of specific nations (vv. 9–11), the claim that each one heard in their own language (v. 6), the specific word for “language”

(*dialectō*, one's own dialect, v. 6). Then compare this with the typical description of modern Charismatic tongues. What are the similarities and differences? And what exegetical weight does the Acts 2 normative description carry for the evaluation of present-day tongues claims?

- Study 1 Corinthians 14:1–25 as Paul's theology of the tongues gift in practice. Note the comparative argument throughout: prophecy is greater than tongues (v. 5); tongues without interpretation are like speaking into the air (v. 9); in the assembled community five intelligible words are better than ten thousand in a tongue (v. 19); tongues are a sign to unbelievers, not to believers (v. 22). What is the overall thrust of Paul's argument, is he promoting tongues or subordinating them? And what does the passage's overall thrust suggest about the Corinthian community's relationship to the gift?
- Read 2 Timothy 4:20, Philippians 2:25–27, and 2 Corinthians 12:7–9 in sequence. For each passage, note: (1) What was the health situation? (2) Was the apostolic healing gift deployed? (3) How was the situation resolved? (4) What does the passage imply about the normative New Testament expectation of believers' experience with sickness? The three passages together constitute a significant body of evidence for the cessationist position on the healing gift; what does the cumulative picture look like?
- Read James 5:13–16 as the New Covenant pattern of healing prayer. Note: the instruction to call for the elders (communal, not individual gifting); the prayer of faith (trusting God's sovereign will, not demanding a specific outcome); the anointing with oil (possibly medicinal, possibly symbolic, in either case not a miraculous act); and the conditional outcome ("the Lord will raise him up", subject to the Lord's sovereign will). How does the James 5 pattern differ from the apostolic healing gift's character? And how should James 5:14–16 shape the church's practice of prayer for the sick?
- Identify a specific person in your pastoral care or your immediate community who has been wounded by false claims about the extraordinary gifts, either the false claim that tongues are the evidence of Spirit-fullness, or the false claim that sufficient faith produces healing, or the false claim that a prophecy carried divine authority it did not actually have. Prepare a pastoral response to that specific person's specific wound, using the specific pastoral statements in Section VI of this lesson. What specific exegetical clarity, what specific pastoral assurance, and what specific prayer would most directly address the wound that false claims have produced?

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. Do you personally know anyone who has been spiritually harmed by the misuse of claims about tongues, prophecy, or healing? Without sharing details that should remain private, what was the nature of the harm, and what theological error was primarily responsible for it? And how does the awareness of that specific human cost change the way you approach the exegetical questions of this lesson?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

2. Read Acts 2:1–11 carefully. What specific evidence does the text provide that the tongues at Pentecost were real human languages (xenolalia) rather than ecstatic, non-cognitive utterance (glossolalia in the modern Charismatic sense)? List at least four specific textual indicators. And what is the crowd's response to the tongues (vv. 7–13), and what does this response reveal about the public intelligibility of what was being heard?
3. Read 1 Corinthians 14:1–25. Note Paul's consistent prioritization of prophecy over tongues throughout the passage. Verse 5: "greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets." Verse 19: "in the church I desire to speak five words with my mind so that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue." Verse 22: "tongues are for a sign... to unbelievers." What is the overall argument Paul is making about the relative value of tongues and prophecy, and what does this reveal about the Corinthian community's evaluation of the two gifts?
4. Read Acts 21:10–14 (the Agabus prophecy) and Acts 21:27–36 (the fulfillment). Compare the prophecy ("the Jews in Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles") with the fulfillment (the Jewish mob seized Paul, the Roman commander arrested him and placed him in chains). Was the prophecy accurately fulfilled? What elements of the fulfillment correspond to the prophecy, and what elements differ? And does the difference between the prophecy's form and the fulfillment's form support or undermine the "fallible prophecy" theory?
5. Read 2 Timothy 4:19–20; Philippians 2:25–30; and 2 Corinthians 12:7–9 in sequence. For each passage, note what the health situation was, whether the apostolic healing gift was deployed, and how the situation was resolved. What does the cumulative picture of these three passages communicate about the normative New Testament experience of sickness among believers, including believers in the apostolic circle?
6. Read James 5:13–16. Identify every element of the healing prayer pattern described: who prays, what is done, in what manner, and with what expected outcome. How does

the James 5 pattern differ from the apostolic healing gift as described in Acts 3:1–10 and Acts 14:8–10? And what does the phrase “the prayer offered in faith” (v. 15) indicate about the nature of the prayer and its relationship to the outcome?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

7. The lesson argues that the tongues gift was a sign to unbelieving Israel (1 Corinthians 14:22; Isaiah 28:11–12), communicating that the covenant’s blessings were being extended to the Gentile nations. The continuationist response is that this purpose does not require the gift’s cessation, that God could continue to use tongues for other purposes even after the initial covenantal sign-function has been fulfilled. How does the cessationist respond to this? Does the Purposes argument require that the gift could serve no purpose after its primary purpose was fulfilled, or only that the gift’s primary purpose has been fulfilled?
8. The lesson distinguishes two types of prophecy: foundational revelatory prophecy (which has ceased) and Spirit-illuminated forth-telling proclamation (which continues). The continuationist response is that this distinction is not supported by the New Testament’s own usage, that the gift of prophecy (*prophēteia*) is a single gift that the New Testament does not subdivide into two categories. Is the cessationist’s spectrum analysis of prophetic language exegetically defensible? What specific New Testament evidence supports or resists the distinction between foundational revelatory prophecy and Spirit-illuminated proclamation?
9. The lesson presents the normative New Testament picture of sickness among believers (Trophimus, Epaphroditus, Paul’s thorn) as evidence against the continuation of apostolic healing on demand. The continuationist response is that these passages show that even in the apostolic era, healing was not always granted, which proves only that God is sovereign, not that the healing gift has ceased. Is this response satisfying? Does the cessationist need the normative sickness passages to show that the healing gift has ceased, or can the cessationist argument proceed on the Purposes and Foundational arguments alone?
10. The lesson describes the pastoral harm of false tongues, prophecy, and healing claims. The continuationist might respond that the pastoral harm is the result of the misuse of the gifts, not of the gifts themselves, and that the appropriate response to misuse is correction and regulation (as Paul did in 1 Corinthians 14) rather than the conclusion that the gifts have ceased. How does the cessationist respond to this pastoral counter-argument? Is there a form of the Charismatic tradition’s gift practice that the cessationist would regard as non-harmful, and if so, what would it look like?
11. The lesson closes with the affirmation that the Spirit still works powerfully through the ordinary gifts, the Word, and sovereign providential healing. The continuationist might ask: if the cessationist affirms sovereign healing in response to prayer, what distinguishes this from what the continuationist calls “healing”? And if both cessationist and continuationist communities pray for the sick with faith and occasionally see

remarkable recoveries, what is the practical difference between their positions at the level of pastoral practice?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

12. The lesson proposes developing a pastoral response to someone who has been wounded by false claims about the extraordinary gifts. Having identified a specific person or type of situation from your pastoral context, write the specific pastoral response you would offer: what biblical truth would you bring to bear, what emotional acknowledgment of the wound would you express, and what practical pastoral action would you recommend? How does the exegetical clarity of this lesson enable a more specific and more compassionate pastoral response than a vague “God loves you”?
13. The James 5:13–16 pattern of healing prayer is the New Covenant model for the church’s ministry to the sick. How does your congregation currently practice this? Are the elders called on regularly to pray for the sick with anointing? Is there a community culture in which the prayer of faith for physical healing is taken seriously, practiced regularly, and received with genuine expectation that God may choose to heal? If not, what would it take to cultivate this culture in a way that is theologically grounded (affirming God’s sovereign freedom to heal or not to heal) rather than theologically manipulative (promising healing to those with sufficient faith)?
14. The lesson identifies three specific pastoral statements for three specific categories of people hurt by false claims. Which of these three categories of pastoral casualty do you encounter most frequently in your ministry context: the seeker of tongues whose spiritual confidence has been undermined by the failure to receive the gift; the sick person whose theology of healing has made her responsible for her own non-healing; or the person whose faith was built on a false prophecy? What specific resources from this lesson and the broader series would you bring to bear on the most common casualty in your specific context?
15. The lesson ends with the cessationist’s affirmative vision: the Spirit still works powerfully, the Word is fully sufficient, the ordinary gifts are richly provided, and sovereign healing answers prayer. Does this affirmative vision feel as rich and as compelling to you as the Charismatic vision of continuing extraordinary gifts? If not, what specifically feels impoverished about it, and how would you address that sense of impoverishment from the pneumatology this series has established? Is the felt impoverishment a genuine theological deficiency in the cessationist position, or a cultural conditioning toward the spectacular that the biblical theology of the ordinary gifts needs to address?

Prayer Focus

Open this lesson with the reading of 2 Corinthians 12:7–9, Paul’s account of the thorn, the three prayers, and God’s answer. Before any discussion begins, sit in the text’s testimony: the apostle through whom God performed “extraordinary miracles” (Acts 19:11) prayed three times for healing and was told, not “Your faith is insufficient” or “This is not God’s will for you” but “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” The God who answered Paul in this way is the God who answers every prayer of His children, not always with the removal of the suffering, but always with the provision of sufficient grace within it. This is the pneumatological reality within which the Christian community lives: not the expectation of miraculous relief from every suffering, but the assurance of the Spirit’s sufficient presence within every suffering that is not immediately relieved.

Begin the prayer with specific intercession for those who have been wounded by false claims about the extraordinary gifts. Without naming specific individuals, pray specifically for the three categories identified in this lesson: those whose spiritual confidence was undermined by the failure to receive tongues; those whose theology of healing made them responsible for their own illness or bereavement; and those whose faith was built on prophecies that proved false. Ask the Spirit to bring healing to the specific theological wounds that specific people in each category are carrying, not merely comfort in general but the specific exegetical clarity and pastoral assurance that the New Testament’s actual teaching provides for each specific wound.

Pray then for the sick in the gathered community using the James 5 pattern: not the demand of healing on the basis of sufficient faith, but the prayer of faith that trusts God’s sovereign good will and asks specifically for healing while acknowledging God’s freedom to answer differently. If there are those present who are suffering from chronic illness, unresolved health crises, or the loss of loved ones to illness, pray for them specifically, by name if possible, with the specific elder-prayer that James 5:14–16 prescribes. And for those whose prayers for healing have not been answered in the way they hoped, pray for the grace that Paul found sufficient within the thorn, the specific, personal, Spirit-given assurance that God’s power is perfected in the weakness that healing has not yet removed.

Close with the affirmative vision: the Spirit is present, the Spirit is active, and the Spirit is sufficient for the church’s permanent mission. Read Acts 1:8 aloud as the Spirit’s own commission: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” The Spirit who was poured out at Pentecost is still present; the power that was promised is still available; the witness that was commissioned is still the church’s calling. The extraordinary gifts have fulfilled their authenticating purpose; the ordinary gifts remain, the Word remains, the Spirit remains, and the mission remains. Pray for the faithful, Spirit-dependent, Word-saturated exercise of the ordinary gifts that the permanent mission of the permanent church requires. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

*“Is anyone among you sick?
Then he must call for the elders of the church
and they are to pray over him,
anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord;
and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is
sick,
and the Lord will raise him up.”*
James 5:14–15, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Acts 2:1–11; 19:11–12; 21:10–36; 1 Corinthians 14:1–25; 1 Corinthians 14:21–22; Isaiah 28:11–12; 2 Corinthians 12:7–9; 2 Timothy 4:20; Philippians 2:25–30; James 5:13–16; Acts 3:1–10; Acts 1:8; Deuteronomy 18:21–22

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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