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**Acts 2:1–12, NLT, abridged.**

*On the day of Pentecost all the believers were together in one place. <sup>4</sup> And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability. <sup>5</sup> There were Jews from every nation living in Jerusalem. They heard their own languages being spoken by the believers. <sup>7</sup> They were completely amazed. “How can this be?” they exclaimed. “These people are all from Galilee, <sup>8</sup> and yet we hear them speaking in our own native languages! <sup>9</sup> Here we are—Parthians, Medes, Elamites, people from Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, the province of Asia, <sup>10</sup> Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, and the areas of Libya around Cyrene, visitors from Rome, Cretans, and Arabs. And we all hear these people speaking in our own languages about the wonderful things God has done!” <sup>12</sup> They stood there amazed.*

**1 Corinthians 14:2–25, NLT, abridged.**

*If you have the ability to speak in tongues, you will be talking only to God, since people won’t be able to understand you. <sup>3</sup> But one who prophesies strengthens others, encourages them, and comforts them. <sup>4</sup> A person who speaks in tongues is strengthened personally, but one who speaks a word of prophecy strengthens the entire church. You are eager to have the special abilities the Spirit gives; seek those that will strengthen the whole church. <sup>13</sup> So anyone who speaks in tongues should pray also for the ability to interpret what has been said.*

*<sup>8</sup> I thank God that I speak in tongues more than any of you. <sup>19</sup> But in a church meeting I would rather speak five understandable words to help others than ten thousand words in an unknown language. <sup>21</sup> It is written in the Scriptures:*

*“I will speak to my own people through strange languages and through the lips of foreigners. But even then, they will not listen to me,” says the LORD.*

*If unbelievers come into your church meeting and hear everyone speaking in an unknown language, they will think you are crazy. <sup>24</sup> But if all of you are prophesying, they will be convicted of sin and judged by what you say. <sup>25</sup> As they listen, their secret thoughts will be exposed, and they will fall to their knees and worship God.*

## **Tongues.**

I was once asked by a patient if I could talk to him in tongues. I was taken aback, but as I have learned to do, I didn't let it show. I said no, that isn't something we do in my tradition, which is Methodism. He said that he thought that all Christians talked in tongues, that it was something they practiced in all their services, that talking in tongues is the "language of the angels". He was a Pentecostal Christian, and their name comes from the word Pentecost, the Jewish holiday that was being celebrated on the day believers from far and wide were touched by the Holy Spirit, allowing them to perform the miracle of speaking in tongues. Here is a cutdown version of what we read in Acts, Chapter 2: *On the day of Pentecost all the believers were together in one place. <sup>4</sup>And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability. <sup>5</sup>There were Jews from every nation living in Jerusalem. They heard their own languages being spoken by the believers. <sup>7</sup>They were completely amazed. "How can this be?" they exclaimed. "These people are all from Galilee, <sup>8</sup>and yet we hear them speaking in our own native languages! <sup>9</sup>Here we are—Parthians, Medes, Elamites, people from Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, the province of Asia, <sup>10</sup>Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, and the areas of Libya around Cyrene, visitors from Rome, Cretans, and Arabs. And we all hear these people speaking in our own*

*languages about the wonderful things God has done!”<sup>12</sup> They stood there amazed.*

Notice that these people were not talking in some Heavenly language that humans cannot comprehend. They were talking in their own languages, but people from very different language groups heard them as if the speakers were speaking the listeners' languages. Importantly, we are told: *And we all hear these people speaking in our own languages about the wonderful things God has done!* In other words, the speakers were believers, and the Holy Spirit was allowing them talk about Jesus Christ and about faith in a way in which everyone could understand them. One of the purposes of this miracle was evangelism. These places, by the way, are indeed from a very wide area of their known world. Parthians came from as far away as India. Medes came from east of Mesopotamia, northwest of Persia. Elamites came from north of the Persian Gulf. Cappadocia, Pontus, and Asia refer to areas in Asia Minor. Egypt was far to the south and east. Libya was south on the continent of Africa. Rome was far north and west. This is an amazing event. People are there from almost every corner of the world as they know it. They have all come for the festival of Pentecost, which is a celebration of the harvest – and all of them can understand the disciples of Jesus as they preach the Word.

I didn't fully understand this patient's religious traditions, so I didn't want to risk telling him that there was no need for me to speak in tongues: we already knew

the same language. Instead, I asked him what talking in tongues did for him, spiritually. Before I tell you what he told me, let's look at our second passage. It is from the 14<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Paul's first letter to the believers in Corinth, and it provides some insight into what must have been a misconception among some of the believers in Corinth, a misconception about what it means to speak in tongues:

*If you have the ability to speak in tongues, you will be talking only to God, since people won't be able to understand you. <sup>3</sup> But one who prophesies strengthens others, encourages them, and comforts them. <sup>4</sup> A person who speaks in tongues is strengthened personally, but one who speaks a word of prophecy strengthens the entire church. You are eager to have the special abilities the Spirit gives; seek those that will strengthen the whole church. <sup>13</sup> So anyone who speaks in tongues should pray also for the ability to interpret what has been said.*

Paul doesn't define the gift of talking in tongues. But, apparently, people in Corinth are under the impression that they can strengthen the faith of others by witnessing or preaching to a group containing full believers as well as those whose faith is young - but doing so in a language that others do not know. Paul is trying to straighten out their Christian practices. But using the incident from Acts as a basis, we can guess that this is what he is saying: If you have the ability to talk in languages others don't know, or if you miraculously can speak in languages that

you didn't know that you knew, be careful. It doesn't do any good to preach the Word if folks cannot understand you. You'll be being selfish because this process of speaking in tongues somehow helps you get closer to God. He goes on to say:

*<sup>8</sup>I thank God that I speak in tongues more than any of you. <sup>19</sup>But in a church meeting I would rather speak five understandable words to help others than ten thousand words in an unknown language. <sup>21</sup>It is written in the Scriptures:*

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Paul is concerned here that the message being conveyed within a church is understandable. He's minimizing the value of talking in tongues. It helps the speaker, perhaps, but not the listener, unless the listener can understand what is being said. But there is something even better than simply being understood. Notice the use of the word "prophesy". The Greek word used in this passage is: *prophēteuōn*. It is the prefix "pro", which means "before", followed by a form of the root "phē-", meaning speech. So, to prophesy could mean to speak about

something before it happens. But this Greek word was used directly to refer to the process of speaking for someone else. In this case, of course, we are talking about speaking for God, which is what the Prophets of the Old Testament did. Here is what Paul is saying: If you are speaking in the language everyone knows or if you are talking in tongues and someone is translating for you, and if thereby you are not just speaking the truth, but you are prophesying, then this is the most powerful way to serve. This word, prophesy, is of course a very, very loaded term biblically. The early Christians did not have the New Testament: they had the Jewish scriptures, and they studied the works of the prophets. In his letters, Paul doesn't shy away from listing his credentials as an evangelist and preacher, as the teacher of new pastors. He calls himself an Apostle and lists himself right up there with the original twelve. He also comes very close to calling himself a prophet and he often writes in very prophetic terms. Later in this letter, in Chapter 15, Paul writes this:

*<sup>51</sup> But let me reveal to you a wonderful secret. We will not all die, but we will all be transformed! <sup>52</sup> It will happen in a moment, in the blink of an eye, when the last trumpet is blown. For when the trumpet sounds, those who have died will be raised to live forever. And we who are living will also be transformed. <sup>53</sup> For our dying bodies must be transformed into bodies that will never die; our mortal bodies must be transformed into immortal bodies.*

*<sup>54</sup> Then, when our dying bodies have been transformed into bodies that will never die, this Scripture will be fulfilled:*

*"Death is swallowed up in victory.*

*<sup>55</sup> O death, where is your victory?*

*O death, where is your sting?"*

Notice that he is predicting the future, and he is doing it in very prophetic, colorful language. In fact, at the end of this passage, he even quotes the great Prophet Isaiah. Most of all, Paul seems to be speaking for God here, something that few of us would ever dare claim to do. But there is something more important about being a prophet, about prophesizing, and this is what Paul is getting at. The prophets of the Old Testament were constantly trying to inspire God's Chosen People to live by their covenant with God. They were also trying to instruct people in a way that was deeply spiritual. They served a majestic role. They had visions. They were poetic. They knew how to get people's attention in a way that no common person could do. They did this by being substitutes for God. In Acts 3:22, Luke, the author of Acts, quotes Moses: <sup>22</sup> *Moses said, 'The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from among your own people. Listen carefully to everything he tells you.'* He is referring to this passage from Deuteronomy 18: <sup>18</sup> *I will raise up a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites. I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell the people everything I command him.* We're being told here that Moses was a predecessor of Jesus, that Jesus is a prophet, besides being the Son of God. That's how powerful being a prophet is: it is a special gift given to people who are then able to touch people like Jesus can, like God can. This is what Paul is getting at in our quote from 1<sup>st</sup>

Corinthians. He's saying that speaking in tongues is useful for the speaker if it inspires them to grow their faith, to grow closer to God. If someone can translate, then that's all the better, because the speaker can then touch the minds and hearts of others. But he wants people to understand that when it comes to spreading the faith, there is something radically more important: the ability to prophesize, to touch the souls of others the way that Christ would. Strive for this, he says, not for babbling in ways no one can understand and might not even be real languages. Paul knew that this was the best way for people to grow their faith. In our passage, Paul wants to make sure not that people *know about* Jesus and God, as any believer could convey, but that we all *know* Jesus and God.

Here is what the believer who asked me if I could talk in tongues said when I asked him what talking in tongues did for him. He said that it relaxed him, that it was like meditating, that when he got down on his knees on the hardwood floor of the den in his home, he could slip into a special place. He didn't yell out. He said that he spoke very softly, that he let the Holy Spirit fill his lungs and his mouth with some strange language that came from God. At first, his knees would hurt, and he would wobble. His back would quickly grow sore. Then, after a while, maybe after twenty minutes, he would find himself not even having to work at talking in tongues. Things would just come out and he didn't listen to



what he was saying. He would stop feeling his back or his knees. He would feel like he was floating. He would truly feel like he was in the presence of God, that Jesus Christ was standing before him, a hand on his shoulder, blessing him. There is nothing wrong with this. I told this man that I was very happy for him. I haven't given a pseudonym for him, as I usually do when I tell someone's private story. But this time, I won't give him a fake name. In truth his real name was the name of one of the prophets of the Old Testament. We'll leave it at that.

Connecting with God in any way that you can is beautiful. But strive for even more. See what gift God has given you to touch other people in a deep, meaningful way. I am no prophet. You may not have the gift of prophesy, either. But all of us can use whatever gift we do have – and we all have some gift – to inspire others with our faith. Witness. It's a tough thing to do in today's world where it is often, at best, politically incorrect to do so. Nonetheless, see how you can get people to *know* God, not just know about God. Please pray with me.

*God, give us whatever gift you see as the best gift for each of us. Maybe it is to talk in tongues. Maybe it is to teach others basic, cold, biblical facts about God and about Jesus. Maybe, just maybe, it is to be a little prophetic, to have just a touch of that incredible, ultimate gift of truly letting someone know God the Father, Jesus the son, and the Holy Spirit in an intimate fashion. Amen.*