

Acts

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

The Gift Of Prophecy

February 25th, 2024

Acts 21:1-14

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Introduction:

Good morning, Redeemer! I want to invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 21.

This morning, we are going to be talking about the gift of prophecy.

As I say that, some of you are thrilled, but a *much larger* some of you are unsettled. I confess I am inclined to fall into the second camp. I have no shortage of stories about my bad experiences with people claiming to use the “gift of prophecy.” I have witnessed worship services that turned into silliness. I have counselled Christians who were affirmed in their sin by a “prophet.” I confess, I felt something of a nervous twitch as I began studying for today’s sermon.

But, as I said last Sunday when we considered the gift of leadership, the misuse of a thing does not negate a thing. If your neighbour got electrocuted trying to defrost the driveway with a hairdryer, that doesn’t mean that you need to throw away *your* hairdryer. You just need to use it correctly.

If prophecy is a gift that God has given to His church – and I will argue this morning that it IS – then it would be unwise of us to cross our arms and to refuse one of the tools that our Father has given to us for our good.

So, I want to invite you to set aside your prejudice this morning. Be like the Bereans. Open your Bible and see for yourself what God has revealed in His Word. Look with me to Acts 21:1-14. Hear now God’s holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

And when we had parted from them and set sail, we came by a straight course to Cos, and the next day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara. ² And having found a ship crossing to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. ³ When we had come in sight of Cyprus, leaving it on the left we sailed to Syria and landed at Tyre, for there the ship was to unload its cargo. ⁴ And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. ⁵ When our days there were ended, we departed and went on our journey, and they all, with wives and children, accompanied us until we were outside the city. And kneeling down on the beach, we prayed ⁶ and said farewell to one another. Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home.

⁷ When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for one day. ⁸ On the next day we departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. ⁹ He had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied. ¹⁰ While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. ¹¹ And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" ¹² When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. ¹³ Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." ¹⁴ And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done." (Acts 21:1-14 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Before we turn our attention to the gift of prophecy, I want to point out an amazing detail that you might have missed. The Philip that we meet in verse 8 is the same Philip that was set apart by the church in Jerusalem to care for the widows back in chapter 6. He was good friends with Stephen.

Do you remember what happened to Stephen? He was stoned to death by a crowd that was led by Paul. Think about that: Paul essentially murdered Stephen's good friend in cold blood. Not only that, but Philip was one of the men who was forced to flee from Jerusalem for his life because of the persecution that Paul was instigating. In fact, most of the believers in the regions of Cyprus, Tyre and Caesarea would have been led to the Lord through the testimony of the Christians who were fleeing for their life from Paul.

And yet, some twenty years later, we find Philip settled in his new home with four daughters, worshiping with the man who murdered Stephen and terrorized the church.

Listen: The gospel has the power to heal the deepest, darkest wounds. It has the power to transform your enemy into your brother. So, pray for those who persecute you. The story's not over. Twenty years from now, you might find yourself worshiping next to one another.

That's not the main point of our passage this morning, but I wanted to make sure that you didn't miss it.

As we zoom in, however, what is particularly striking is the way that this passage is SATURATED with the gift of prophecy! In these two paragraphs we find a church in Tyre who speak a message from the Holy Spirit – that's in verse 4 – and we find Philip's four daughters who all exercise the gift of prophesy – that's in verse 9 – and then we find a prophet named Agabus who is called by God to act out a prophecy for Paul – that's in verse 11. So, let's consider this story and ask the question:

What Does This Passage Teach Us About The Gift Of Prophecy?

First:

1. It is the communication of a revelation given by God

What is the difference between the gift of prophecy and some of the other speaking gifts like the gift of teaching or the gift of encouragement? What makes prophecy distinct? We find a hint in this passage. Look again at verses 4 and 11:

And **through the Spirit** they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. (Acts 21:4b ESV)

“Thus says the Holy Spirit, ‘This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.’” (Acts 21:11b ESV)

In both of these instances, the word of prophecy comes – not as carefully reasoned advice or as exposition of a biblical passage – but as a message from God Himself. These messages did not come through study or through reflection but *through the Spirit*. We see this same distinction in

Paul's letter to the Corinthians. While he is giving them instructions on how the gift of prophecy should be used in the church, listen to what he says:

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. ³⁰ **If a revelation is made to another sitting there**, let the first be silent. (1 Corinthians 14:29-30 ESV)

So, the gift of prophecy is different than a sermon, and it is different than a word of encouragement. It is the *communication of a revelation* given from God. Theologian Wayne Grudem explains:

If a message is the result of conscious reflection on the text of Scripture, containing interpretation of the text and application to life, then it is (in New Testament terms) a teaching. But if a message is the report of something God brings suddenly to mind, then it is a prophecy.¹

I've shared this example before but I'm going to share it again because I think it's helpful in fleshing out just what exactly this might look like in the church. Years ago, Amanda and I had been privately praying about whether the time was right to have our third child. She had a good job, we were in a small house, and we weren't sure if it would be feasible to add another baby to the mix. Then, one day after the service, a man from another church approached me and said, "Hey, I know this seems strange, but I had a dream about you and Amanda. I saw hands rising up out of soapy water holding a baby. It made me think of the passage in 1 Timothy where Paul writes, 'and she will be saved through childbearing.' This might be nothing, but I really felt compelled to share that with you." This didn't come from our friend's study time, or from his long, thoughtful processing of our family planning. He didn't even know that we were having this discussion. He just received a message from the Lord and shared it.

We see that same thing happening in this passage. The church in Tyre speaks through the Holy Spirit to Paul, and so too does Agabus. They receive a word from the Lord, and they share it. That's what the gift of prophecy is in a nutshell: It is the communication of a revelation given by God.

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 1058.

But the striking detail in this story is that – in spite of the fact that these prophecies seem to indicate that Paul should not go to Jerusalem – Paul does not change his plans! And that leads us to the second lesson that we learn about the gift of prophecy from this story:

2. It is not authoritative and should be discerned in team

Let me repeat that: The gift of prophecy is NOT authoritative, and it should be discerned in team. It is when we lose sight of this lesson that prophecy becomes less like a gift and more like a weapon in the church.

Look again at verses 13-14. Paul listened intently to the prophetic warning that Agabus spoke to him, but then he replied:

“What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.”¹⁴ And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, “Let the will of the Lord be done.” (Acts 21:13-14 ESV)

Now, if words of prophecy were authoritative, then Paul would be in sin here. If words of prophecy were authoritative, then Agabus and the church would have rebuked Paul for resisting. But prophecy is NOT authoritative, so when Paul weighed the prophecy and determined to go ahead anyway, the church was able to say: “Let the will of the Lord be done.”

So, why didn't Paul listen to their prophetic message?

As we put together the pieces, it seems that God had granted these believers a word or a vision that revealed how greatly Paul would suffer in Jerusalem. They wrongly assumed, however, that this was a sure indication that Paul should cancel the trip! I suspect we would have made a similar assumption. “If you get on this boat, Paul, then you will suffer! You will be imprisoned! SURELY this is not God's will!” But Paul recognized that – while they had been given a true revelation about his suffering – they were following it to a wrong conclusion. Suffering DID wait for him in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit had already given Paul his marching orders. As one commentator notes:

When the Holy Spirit warns that something is going to go wrong, it is not necessarily the case that he is saying the attempt should not be made.²

The consistent message in the New Testament is that prophecy should be *welcomed* but it should never be *treated as authoritative*. It should be weighed against what God has clearly revealed in the Scriptures and it should be discerned in team. Which is why, when Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica, he said:

Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not despise prophecies, ²¹ but **test everything**; hold fast what is good. (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21 ESV)

And when he wrote to the church in Corinth, he said:

Let two or three prophets speak, and **let the others weigh what is said**. (1 Corinthians 14:29 ESV)

There is never an instance in the New Testament where the church is instructed to accept wholesale a word of prophecy. It is ALWAYS to be tested – and the rubric against which we judge any revelation is the Word of God. Paul wrote to Timothy and reminded him:

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ **that the man of God may be complete**, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17 ESV)

In the Word of God, we have been given all that we need to know God rightly and to live for God faithfully. True prophecy, therefore, will never contradict God's Word. If a prophecy is from God, it will always – without exception – align with what God has already revealed here.

Therefore, if ever a person elevates their word of prophecy to be a form of unquestionable authority that must be obeyed, then they are practicing spiritual abuse. NO ONE has that authority.

So, if you sense that God has given you a message to share with someone then by all means, share it! But share it with a humble acknowledgement that you might be mistaken. And be very careful not to give the impression that your message must be obeyed. Encourage that person to share what

² Conrad Kempf et al. eds., *New Bible Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 1099.

you have said with others and to discern in team. And then leave them to sort it out with the Lord. That's what we see modelled in the text in front of us.

The third lesson that we learn about the gift of prophecy from this story is that:

3. It is a gift that is given both to men and to women

It would be hard to deny this after reading this passage. Luke specifically draws our attention to Philip's daughters and tells us in verse 9:

He had four unmarried daughters, **who prophesied**. (Acts 21:9 ESV)

We should not be surprised by this because God told us that He would bring this change about in the New Covenant. In his Pentecost sermon, Peter quotes from Joel 2 and declares:

“And in the last days it shall be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh,
and **your sons and your daughters shall prophesy**,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams;
¹⁸**even on my male servants and female servants**
in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and **they shall prophesy**. (Acts 2:17-18 ESV)

The Bible CLEARLY teaches that both men and women will be given the gift of prophecy, and we see that in our text this morning.

That being said, some DO struggle to accept this, and it's worth taking some time to consider their objection. They would argue that it seems to stand in contradiction with Paul's instruction to the church in Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul writes:

As in all the churches of the saints, ³⁴ **the women should keep silent in the churches**. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. ³⁵ If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For **it is shameful for a woman to speak in church**. (1 Corinthians 14:33b-35 ESV)

At first – and even second – glance, that passage seems to rule out the possibility of women ever sharing a word of prophecy in the church. In fact, it seems to state quite plainly that women shouldn't speak AT ALL. We claim to be a church that follows what we see God to be teaching in His Word, so are we simply ignoring this passage? I've had people ask me that and it's a fair question.

So, ARE we ignoring this passage? No. Well, then why is it that women speak and pray at Redeemer? Our answer is that these verses can only be rightly understood when we look at them in the flow of Paul's argument. So, what is Paul discussing in this passage? If we look back at verse 29, we read:

Let two or three prophets speak, and **let the others weigh what is said.** (1 Corinthians 14:29 ESV)

When we look at the paragraph as a whole, we quickly see that these are instructions about how the church is to discern which prophecies are faithful to Scripture, and which prophecies aren't. Therefore, the paragraph that follows – the paragraph that calls for women to be silent – is an explanation of how this “weighing of prophecy” is to be done.

So, Paul is NOT saying here that women should NEVER speak in a worship service. He CAN'T be saying that because, in chapter 11, he gives instructions on how women are to pray and prophecy in the context of the gathered church. Why would he bother giving them instructions on how to pray and prophecy if a few chapters later he's going to say, “By the way, you're not allowed to pray and prophecy”? That doesn't make sense. It doesn't fit with his earlier instructions in the letter, it doesn't fit with Joel's prophecy that the women would prophecy, and it doesn't fit with the many women in the New Testament – including Philip's daughters – who exercise the gift of prophecy.

So, what Paul seems to be saying in 1 Corinthians 14 is that, if someone speaks out a word of prophecy that is wrong and needs to be corrected, it is the responsibility of the MEN to speak up and address that. That corresponds with Paul's instructions to Timothy where he writes:

I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. (1 Timothy 2:12 ESV)

So, putting it together, we believe that women CAN prophecy and pray in the church, but we believe that men – in particular, the elders – are responsible for finally weighing what has been said and exercising the teaching authority in the church.

Now, the fact that we needed to work through some of those controversial passages might have you grimacing this morning, but I'm actually thankful. This is what's next, and this text provides the opportunity to explain what we believe as a church. Clear is kind, so while we're dealing with these tricky verses, let me take this opportunity to be as clear as possible.

On the one hand, some of you might be shocked to hear that we believe that God has made men and women equal but different and that He has given us different responsibilities in the church. To be clear, here at Redeemer, you will not see women serving as elders or preaching in our worship gatherings. I understand that this might be a deal breaker, but it's important for you to know how we are reading and teaching the Bible and to choose a church accordingly.

And, on the other side of the spectrum, some of you might be shocked to hear that we actually believe that women can and should pray and prophesy in the church. Maybe you suspected that we had never really considered that passage in 1 Corinthians 14, and you simply assumed that we would one day come to our senses and reign it in. It's important for you to know that we *have* studied those passages, and we are *thrilled* to hear the voices of women in this church! We want to be a church where women can serve and *thrive* within the framework that God has ordained. I understand that this might be a deal breaker, but it's important for you to know how we are reading and teaching the Bible and to choose a church accordingly.

So, in summary, we learn from this passage that prophecy is a gift that is given both to men and to women. The fourth and final lesson that we learn about the gift of prophecy in this story is that:

4. It is a gift that we should earnestly desire

I mentioned off the top that I have had some bad experiences with the gift of prophecy. I suspect that some of you have that in common with me. But, again, does that mean that we have

permission to edit the Bible and to dictate to God what we are and are not comfortable with? Does the misuse of a thing allow us to forbid a thing altogether?

If we are going to deal faithfully with the *whole* counsel of Scripture, then we need to be honest enough to say that nowhere in the New Testament are we given permission to forbid the gifts that make us uncomfortable. In fact, on the contrary, Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians:

Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ **Do not despise prophecies** (1 Thessalonians 5:19-20 ESV)

I wonder how many of us have given ourselves permission to use our mental whiteout on *that* passage! How many of us – claiming to be biblical – have given ourselves permission to outright disobey that command?

Or consider Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. There, we are commanded to:

Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, **especially that you may prophesy**. (1 Corinthians 14:1 ESV)

Paul goes on to explain how valuable the gift is in verse 4:

The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but **the one who prophesies builds up the church**. (1 Corinthians 14:4 ESV)

In verse 39, he concludes the argument and brings it full circle:

So, my brothers, **earnestly desire to prophesy**, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. (1 Corinthians 14:39 ESV)

Prophecy is a gift that should be *earnestly desired*. It is a gift the *builds up the church*. *Do not despise prophecies*. If that language bothers us, then we need to wrestle with the fact that those commands are coming directly from the New Testament! Perhaps the problem lies with us.

As we conclude, I want to suggest to you that this gift is already operating in our church – even if we don’t recognize it. It happens when you reach out to someone and say, “Hey, I just really felt the need to pray for you. Is everything okay?” It happens when you are having that impossibly

difficult conversation and out of the blue God gives you exactly the right words to say. It happens when I'm preaching and suddenly I leave my notes because I feel compelled to say something that didn't arise out of my study and sermon prep.

I don't say all that to minimize or trivialize prophecy. I say that to encourage you that this gift might not be as frightening or as dangerous as you are tempted to think.

Prophecy is a gift that God has given to His church. Think about that – this is from God! Are you committed to making sure that the church does not descend into silliness? He's MORE committed! Are you committed to making sure that heretical ideas and wacky dreams are not presented as authoritative truth? He is MORE committed! He's more committed to evangelism than you are – more committed to His holiness – more committed to orderliness – more committed to faithfulness. He is more committed to ALL of the noble things that you are afraid of losing.

And He gave the church this gift. He knows what we need better than we do. So, if we would claim to be shaped by His Word, and if we would claim to be obedient to what we see, then let's open our hands and receive whatever good gifts He sees fit to entrust to us.

Let's pray together.