

## Jason Upchurch - 1 Corinthians 12:10 - The Spirit's Gift of Prophecy

Okay, we are continuing through this section on spiritual gifts. Remember, spiritual gifts are abilities that the Holy Spirit gives to Christians to build up the church. And because all these gifts come from the Spirit, the purpose of the gifts is to promote unity in the body of Christ.

And so this morning we're looking at the gift of prophecy. In a very, very generic sense, prophecy is speaking on God's behalf. As the saying goes: a prophet has his back to God and his face toward the people. A priest has his back to the people and his face toward God.

That's super generic, but just gives you an idea about the gift as a whole.

This gift is significant because prophecy and speaking in tongues, or languages, are the gifts that the Corinthian church seems to be having the largest problem with. We'll survey chapter 14 in just a few minutes, but just know that those 2 gifts really seem to be the big issue.

And the best we can tell, there was something of a competition between people in the church as to who had the better gift: was it prophecy, was it tongues? And in an effort to show just how great they were, it seems the Corinthian church tried to outdo one another in showing off their gifts. We don't know all the details, but like many other aspects of their Sunday gathering, it was not good.

Fast forward to our day, we have issues with the gift of prophecy. But those issues are largely related to how to define prophecy and whether or not we understand if it still goes on. Or has it ceased? Or have some forms of prophecy ceased and others not? Because there is so much discussion in our day on this gift in particular, I want to spend our time unpacking just this one gift this morning.

Prophecy is especially difficult to understand. One reason is that prophecy is a massive umbrella term, so trying to understand what Paul is getting at here is a little tough.

I've done this before, but let me give you a survey of the different ways the word prophecy is used in the Bible.

**1 Samuel 19:** Prophecy is a form of singing praises to God. Remember when Saul wanted to kill David, he sent messengers to go get him? The first group came upon a group of prophets and began prophesying and came back home. The second group did the same.

**1 Samuel 19:23-24:** And he went there to Naioth in Ramah. And the Spirit of God came upon him also, and as he went he prophesied until he came to Naioth in Ramah. And he too stripped off his clothes, and he too prophesied before Samuel and lay naked all that day and all that night. Thus it is said, "Is Saul also among the prophets?"

Now you think you have this spiritual gift, we need to talk. This was an act of judgment on Saul. But interestingly, this was Spirit-powered praise to God. And in God's sense of humor, he humiliated Saul to do it.

This usage of the word for singing and worshipping is fairly common.

Related to that, **1 Chron. 25:1-7:** David's choir prophesied with harp and lyre and cymbals. They were playing music to the glory of God; biblically, it seems as though playing instruments is a form of prophesy.

God giving information about the future is a form of prophesy. That's usually what we think of when we hear the word. That is one function of prophesy. We celebrate Christmas time as a fulfillment of many prophecies about the Messiah. Jesus would be born of a virgin, he would be born in Bethlehem, there would be a forerunner in the spirit of Elijah, he would bear the sins of his people, he would suffer for their sins. Those were all prophecies - information given in the OT - that were fulfilled in Jesus.

We also have windows into the future from our perspective now. The Lord will return in glory, our bodies will be raised, there's going to be some difficulty before Jesus comes back. Those are all prophecies written down in the Bible that look forward to the future.

The work of writing down Scripture is technically a prophetic work. All of the writers of the Bible are considered prophets: they have their proverbial back to God and face to the people and the Spirit moves them along to write down the very words of God, even incorporating their own styles and feel.

There's also a sense in which preaching is prophecy. **Rev. 19:10** says that the testimony about Jesus is the Spirit of prophecy. So it seems as though just telling people about Jesus is an act of prophecy. John MacArthur would say that the divine revelation aspect of prophecy has ceased and now prophecy is simply relegated to preaching the Word. I think that's a little overly simplistic.

Here's where it gets really interesting. Speaking in tongues seems to be a subset of prophecy. We'll look more at **Acts 2** when we cover speaking in tongues, but when the disciples are all speaking in these various languages Peter explains what's happening from a passage in Joel that says what they are doing is prophesy.

Later on in **Acts 10** when Cornelius and his household come to faith, they are speaking in tongues "extolling God" - praising God. It appears that they are singing the praises of God (a type of prophecy) while speaking in tongues (also a type of prophecy). It's like God is mixing and matching the gift of prophecy. But because the expression of the gift is in speaking, it seems as though it's under the umbrella of prophecy.

So when we come to this one gift, there's an awful lot going on. Or that could be going on.

What I want to do is drill down more closely at what we see here in **1 Corinthians** just through the lens of trying to understand prophecy.

Let me define prophecy from when we seem to see here in 1 Corinthians.

Define: It's a divine revelation from God, given to a believer, for the encouragement of the church.

I'm narrowing it to that because Paul doesn't seem to be talking about singing, or writing Scripture, or preaching. He doesn't seem to be talking about the ability to play musical instruments. And as much as tongues might be a subset of prophecy, he distinguishes between the two gifts.

It's also not just comforting, because it seems more obviously supernatural than that.

Define: It's a divine revelation from God, given to a believer, for the encouragement of the church.

I also want to make it clear that the word "revelation" is intentionally vague. I don't think prophecy is necessarily God speaking. It could be a vision or a dream. In Acts 2 we are told that in the last days - which came when the Holy Spirit came - old men would see visions and young men dream dreams.

Prophecy can be in the form of dreams and visions.

Even with that you'll hear people saying "God speaks in a still small voice." Biblically speaking, I don't think that's very helpful. Because one person means that they hear God talking and another person means they just have some kind of intuition about a situation they think is from the Spirit and all the while the actual context of that passage from Elijah's life is God literally speaking quietly.

One of the difficulties we have in discussion spiritual gifts in general, and prophecy in particular, is that many times we just don't use the language the Bible uses so we start improvising. So we come up with all these odd categories that mean different things to different people and then we wonder why there's all this confusion.

So when I say it's divine revelation - and I admit that's kind of vague - I say that because that's the language the Bible uses. And it's vague but I think we need to stick to what the Bible says.

So what does Paul say about prophecy in this section?

1) Prophecy is a greater gift. Read 12:27-31

That last verse is something of a command. Paul wants the Corinthians to desire the greater gifts of prophecy and tongues and miracles (exorcism). Which probably means that in the Corinthian church there was a more obviously supernatural element to the gift. It's greater in the sense that it was more obvious to see God working through someone who has this gift. Like exorcism or tongues.

And he says desire that. Desire the greater gifts. I mean, just on the whole if we could have a church service where people were legit getting healed, demons were cast out, people were getting revelation from God, and miraculously speaking in foreign languages they'd never learned - wouldn't we want that? Well, if it wasn't a zoo - yeah, we'd want that. He says desire those greater gifts. Those are good things from the Holy Spirit.

So prophecy - in this setting - is one of the greater gifts most likely because it's a more obvious example of God breaking in to the world.

2) People can prophesy in a very unloving way. Read 13:1-2

Just like with all the gifts, there's a way to serve the body of Christ but do so in an absolutely unloving way which actually has a negative effect on the church.

You ever know someone who is amazing at what they do but you can't stand to be around them? Maybe they're good at sports or music or their job but they're so harsh it's not worth being around them? That can happen with legit spiritual gifts. Someone can legitimately have spiritual gifts and be so unloving that it's like hanging out with someone just slamming cymbals together and all you want them to do is go away.

Unloving prophets are nothings in the Kingdom of God.

3) Prophecies will go away. Read 13:8-13

So prophecies will cease along with tongues and knowledge - probably the Word of Knowledge gift we saw a few weeks ago. When will that happen?

Well, the cessationist camp has often misunderstood this passage to mean that when all the Bible was written, these things would be done away with. Many in that camp - not all, but many - would say that the perfect is the close of the canon. The canon refers to the Bible that we currently have. So they'd say that when all the books are written - and they have been - then we know tongues and prophecies and knowledge will cease.

The problem is that's simply not what the passage says. The perfect that comes is the telios. Literally, the end. You know when all the spiritual gifts cease for sure? When Jesus comes back. We won't need gifts anymore after that because we'll be in glory. Faith and hope will be gone as well. Faith is believing in things unseen. In the New Heavens there will be no faith, only sight. There will be no hope - no expectation of God's promises - because we will be enjoying them.

It's like when you're unwrapping presents at Christmas there's no more hope - because you're enjoying the fulfillment of that hope.

Prophecy and tongues and knowledge will cease when Jesus returns. Why does Paul include this? Because it's helpful to get an eternal perspective on the work of God. However God is using you now, it's only this way for a short season. And the whole deck will be reshuffled when Jesus comes back. The first are last and the last are what? First.

Our place in the eternal Kingdom might be very different than our place in the church or society or the economy now. Don't be proud about where you're at because it will all change.

4) Prophecies are often not perfect. This one is weird. Read 9-11

This is one of the bones of contention when people are talking about prophesy.

One type of prophecy is giving apostles the inerrant word of God. No flaws, no fallibility. But there are other times when it seems clear that we need to carefully evaluate someone who says they are prophesying. How is that possible? How can there be both?

Because prophecy, in the sense of God revealing something to us, is only done in part. That's the point here. The person who prophesies only prophesies in part. Paul's use of prophecy here is not the full revelation that comes with Scripture.

He says we see in a mirror dimly. You guys who shave: if you've ever shaved after a shower and you've got the mirror covered in steam. And there's this level of acceptability of fog, right? Where you can just barely see enough to shave. Much more fog, you'd be a bloody mess.

Prophecy seems to be the same way. It's not fog-less. It's hard to understand fully. Maybe sometimes there's more clarity than others, but it seems like it's often confusing.

Think about some of those dreams and visions in the OT. Why didn't God just tell Pharaoh in a dream "Hey, there's gonna be 7 years of famine and you need to make Joseph your second in command"? Instead he's got this crazy dream of fat clowns and skinny cows and fat stalks of corn and skinny stalks of corn. And Joseph lays it all out. Seems like a lot of rigmarole. But that's how God chooses to communicate sometimes.

Just like when you read through the minor prophets and you're like "what is the world is he talking about?" Well, that's the written down word of God. It shouldn't surprise us when prophecy is hard to discern as well.

Paul also says it's like trying to understand what a little child is trying to explain to you. Not that God is a child, but that we're trying the best we can to understand incomplete messages.

Why would God do this? How is this encouraging? Because it requires us to depend on the Word to evaluate prophesies, and also keeps us humble that God isn't a magic genie who answers our every question.

But all through the Bible we have evidence God revealed something to people and when they relayed them it didn't turn out exactly like God said.

The classic example is in the book of Acts there's a prophet named Agabus who says in the Holy Spirit that if Paul goes to Jerusalem he'll be bound up by the Jews. Well, Paul does go to Jerusalem and is bound up but it's not by the Jews, but by the Romans. Was the Holy Spirit wrong? Did he make a mistake?

The answer is no. Whatever was revealed to Agabus wasn't precisely what happened. He saw in a mirror darkly. He prophesied in part. So there was some sifting to be done. More on that in a bit.

#### 5) Prophecy is pretty tame most of the time. Read 14:1-3

So we'll get deeper into this later, but we are called to earnestly desire spiritual gifts, especially prophecy. Why? Because prophecy is often expressed simply as upbuilding, encouragement or consolation to the church.

Again, there's a supernatural element there but the end result is that the church is encouraged or comforted. It's not always this amazing, fantastic over the top thing. I don't want to be too flippant but prophets in the NT seem to be sort of the cheerleaders of the Church. They're the Spirit powered optimists who keep the church going by revelations from God.

I was at a meeting a couple weeks ago with some pastor friends and there was this guy there who I'd never met and he started talking about his four square background and I'm thinking "this is going to be uncomfortable" and then he just started encouraging the whole group and admonishing us to be strong and faithful and assured in the Lord's power and work during this weird time in history. And I'll tell you, it was good and I felt very encouraged. I think he has, at least in this sense, the prophetic gift of upbuilding.

#### 6) Prophecy is a sign for believers. Read 22-25

Alright, this can be a little confusing because on first glance it seems as though Paul is contradicting himself in the course of 2 verses.

Is prophecy for believers or unbelievers. Let's say this: **primarily** prophecy is a sign for believers. Two quick notes. First, it's a sign which means that whatever Paul has in mind here is probably more than just simply encouraging people. It seems as though this likely includes some kind of revelation from God. That God is probably revealing something supernaturally to the person with the gift of prophecy and the primary goal is build up the church.

But, secondly, sometimes this has an effect on **unbelievers** as well. How is that? Well it appears that there's sometimes some spillover.

Let me try to explain this by way of analogy. When I'm preaching, I preach primarily for believers. That's my goal: to build up the body of Christ through the preaching of his Word. So when I'm preaching it's as though I'm having a sit down conversation with another believer and we're on the same page with a lot of different issues. And my goal is **John 17:17**: that believers would be sanctified by the truth of the Word of God.

But sometimes unbelievers are listening too. Can they be convicted or encouraged or challenged? Of course.

I think that's what Paul has in mind with prophesy here. Prophesy primarily affects believers, but sometimes it has an amazing effect on unbelievers. **Read 24**

So it's almost like what we talked about a few weeks ago with Words of Knowledge. It seems that sometimes the Spirit gives this revelation that completely convicts unbelievers and there is irrefutable evidence that the Lord is there. The secrets are disclosed - their secret sinful life is laid completely bare and net result is conversion.

That's why I think Paul has in mind some kind of supernatural revelation because the effect on the unbeliever is utter conviction. So it can happen.

#### 7) Not every prophecy needs to be shared. Read 26-33

This is pretty interesting. Paul doesn't question whether the gift is legitimate. He just says that not everything the Spirit brings to mind needs to be shared. Two or three people at the most can share.

Think about that. This is one way we know that prophecy is not the same as God writing down the Bible. Nowhere do we have evidence that God moved people to write parts of the Bible and then he was like "Nah, it's okay if they don't get that information." We have all the Bible. But here, it seems pretty clear we don't have every prophecy recorded. And that's okay and as it should be.

Just because someone gets a prophecy doesn't mean it needs to be shared.

#### 8) Prophecies are to be evaluated. Read 31-40

Okay there's a lot here I promise we'll unpack later. But the thing I want you to see is that prophecies are to be evaluated. The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. Prophets don't get a trump card.

That's why I don't like it when someone says "Well, God told me." That's not good because it's a trump card. Prophets don't get one of those.

Paul says what the trump card is: the Word of God. If someone thinks they're a prophet you know what they'll acknowledge is never fallible? The Word.

Prophecies need to be tested by the Word. We see this in other places too.

**Turn to 1 Thess. 5:19-22. Read**

This is odd. Why would people despise prophecies? I mean, if it's genuine from the Lord why would there be hatred? Because prophecies are often weird. There's looking into a foggy mirror.

Just like there are parts of the OT we're like "Okay I have no idea what to do with that so I'm just going to go read Genesis" - there are prophecies that are odd.

Imagine someone got up today and said, "Guys I think God revealed something to me last night! I had this sort of vision of these weird animals. One's like a lion but has bear claws, ones like an eagle but it's got a human face. And there was this wheel inside of a wheel and turned."

And we're like, "Okay, time to sit down." And we lean over to the visitor and we're like "I'm so sorry, that's Ezekiel. He does that from time to time." "Was he the guy who sat outside naked for a couple years?" "We don't really talk about that these days."

It seems that they can be weird and we'd be tempted to desire them. Paul's concern here is that we might literally hate a revelation from God because it's too weird for us. Where we just aren't sure how to handle them.

So Paul says, don't hate these things but test them. Test them to see if they're real. Test them by the truth. Keep what's good, throw out the rest.

What does this look like today? Well, as I already mentioned, I'd be very careful ever saying something was "from the Lord" except a Bible verse taken in context. That's the only thing we know is from the Lord.

But to the point: does God give revelations to us today? Again, I am open to this. I'm open but cautious.

However, I know too many people who have had a dream or a some kind of revelation generically that wasn't a bad thing, wasn't a weird thing. It's usually for encouragement to them or the church.

We're not talking Scripture level authority. Let me just say, people who reject that God might work this way now often say "Well, if that's the case we have an open canon." That can't be a legitimate objection because that would have always an objection. If prophecy equals the same authority as the Bible then somehow we've lost all these writings from all these prophets. But no one thinks that. And Paul doesn't think that.

Somehow, whatever the prophecies were in Paul's day weren't a threat to the Scripture. And I think if prophecy does go on now, it would never be a threat to Scripture.

So what do we do? We desire that this would happen. But we evaluate everything carefully. Like I mentioned last week, we should be suspicious of our own hearts and minds and thoughts.

If someone came to me and said, "Pastor Jason I think God revealed this thing to me." I wouldn't just say "Oh great, go do whatever he revealed." No, we'd have a long conversation. I want to make sure this dream you had was from God and not Nyquil. We're going to make sure what you have is square with God's Word.

You say well I don't have this gift, what do I do? You have an even greater source of God's revelation: his holy Word. Know it, and commit yourself to it.

**Pray**