

Challenging the Comfortable

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[0 : 00] that we celebrate Pentecost, the giving of the Holy Spirit, who came to give us gifts for the edification of the Church. How appropriate that today we look at this passage from Acts chapter 21.

Today we're going to look at the passage, we're also going to focus on the issue of prophecy, its use in the New Testament and in the Church today. So before we do that, why don't I pray for us to begin.

Let's pray together. Dear Lord, please open our eyes, open our hearts to what you'd have to say to us today. Please change us to be more like Jesus.

Please change any presuppositions that we have that are false to be more in line with your truth. I'm proud in Jesus' name. Amen.

I never had a, I can't remember a particular children's story that was my favourite when I was growing up. But I've got a favourite now. It's The Voyage of the Dawn Treader. Who's with me?

[1 : 05] Chronicles of Narnia, C.S. Lewis, book four? Five? Five. Anyhow, The Voyage of the Dawn Treader is a great, great book, Every Boy's Dream.

It's about ships and sea monsters and dragons and battles and it's a magnificent, magnificent book. And when I read through the Acts of the Apostles and particularly when we look at the last few chapters that we've been looking at here in the morning, it reminds me of a story like that.

If you follow Paul's journeys and his missionary travels, he's boarding ships and escaping from captors and sometimes not escaping and getting beaten and thrown in jail.

And it's an incredible story. Better than fiction, actually, I think. And this morning we're going to see Paul finish his third missionary journey and end up in Jerusalem.

And I thought it would be good just to do a quick survey of this journey before we get into the issue of prophecy in the church today. So if you remember last week when our Paul preached to us, Paul was left in Miletus.

[2 : 17] He was tearing himself away from the Ephesian elders there. It was a very sad occasion. If you look at the Greek behind the words in verses 1 to 3, there's great emotional difficulty in Paul's heart.

He's very torn. He doesn't want to leave. But he knows he has to leave. Remember in chapter 20 he said he's been constrained by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem.

So he knows he must leave and so he's torn away from his friends and he boards a ship and sails away. And he has a series of one-day stops initially.

He goes to the Isle of Koz that's about 40 miles away from Miletus. Then onto the Isle of Rhodes that's another 90 miles. Then another 60 miles to Patara which is on the coast.

And he did this by boarding a small vessel that would coast around the land quite close to shore and navigate along the shoreline on his way to Patara.

[3 : 23] And Koz, for your information, apparently had a very well-renowned medical school and also a Jewish community. Perhaps Luke, who's with him now, the physician, wanted to check in at the medical school, see what was happening there.

The Jewish community, that was an opportunity to preach to them the gospel. Same with Rhodes. It was a center of education. Another Jewish community. And then they end up in Patara in western La Sia.

I don't have a map but you can look this up afterwards. I'm telling the truth, I promise. At La Sia, there was a port there and there was a large ship that they could board. So they boarded that large ship to make the 400-mile journey across the Mediterranean Sea which took them about three to five days.

They kept Cyprus, you know, the Isle of Cyprus. Some of you might have been there. They kept that on their left and so navigated straight across to Phoenicia.

So they ended up in Phoenicia. They unloaded, or ended up in Tyre, I should say. They unloaded their freight which gave Paul and his companions a chance to get to know the disciples there, the believers.

[4 : 37] They'd been believers there, I think, for about 20 years. So they had a week to get to know them and they ended up getting to know them very well so that when they left, it was another sad occasion.

At Tyre, Phoenicia is like the coastal strip, like the Sunshine Coast area, the tourism Mecca and then Syria is the larger region around it. Like I said, there'd been Christians there for 20 years.

So a church was established and he got to know those brothers and sisters while he was there. After a week, he had to leave and the disciples there, the believers, are very concerned for Paul. They know that he's heading off to Jerusalem and they're very worried and they urge him not to leave. But he goes on. He's convinced that it's what God wants him to do.

So he farewells his friends, similar to last week. He farewells his friends on the beach and then jumps aboard the ship once more. They sail to Ptolemaeus.

[5 : 34] That's about one day away, about 25 miles south of Tyre. So we're moving down the coast now towards Jerusalem. Still 80 miles from Jerusalem. So still a little way to go. There were Jews and Christians there as well.

Then they sail on to Caesarea. That's Caesarea Maritima. It's about 40 miles south. That was a big port district from Mount Carmel.

So six harbors, lots of ships. They dock in there and it's there that Paul stays with Philip and his four unmarried daughters who are all prophetesses. He also receives a prophecy there from Agabus about what will happen to him if he goes to Jerusalem, that he will be arrested.

So we'll get to that in a second. More on prophecy in a minute. But Paul's response to that prophecy is that he accepts it. He knows he's going to be persecuted if he goes to Jerusalem.

But again, he knows it's God's will for him to go. So he decides to travel there anyway. And finally, Paul and his crew leave the sea. They travel by horse probably to the house of Nason.

[6 : 40] It's unclear whether Nason lives in Jerusalem or outside. But either way, they finish the 60 mile horseback journey and they arrive in Jerusalem.

And that finishes the third missionary journey of Paul in Acts. It's an incredible journey. Full of danger, full of gospel opportunities. And we should thank God that Paul had the courage to travel that way and to do what he did and to embrace the cost.

So why don't we dive in now to this issue of prophecy. You'll notice in this chapter, the mention of prophecy comes quite often. You have the prophecy earlier on from the believers before he leaves that he should not go to Jerusalem.

Then we have the mention of the four daughters who are prophetesses. Then we have the prophecy of Agabus. And I think it's very important that we look at this issue of prophecy because I think it's an area where there's a lot of confusion.

And we also have some extreme views on prophecy that can be very unhelpful. So one extreme view is the view of cessationists. Cessationists believe that after the apostles died out, many of the gifts of the Holy Spirit died out as well.

[7 : 58] And today there is no such thing as a gift of prophecy. Or at best, the gift of prophecy is the gift of teaching or preaching. That's one extreme. The other extreme, we have some extreme kind of charismatic theology that says that the gift of prophecy is of utmost importance.

That fresh revelation from God is more important than the scriptures because it's new revelation. And we want to avoid that extreme as well. I think there's a balanced way of understanding the gift of prophecy.

That's what we're going to talk about this morning. I think it's biblical. And just to note, I've been really helped by a man named Dr. Wayne Grudem. He's a theologian. He did his doctorate on this issue.

It was called *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*. So Wayne Grudem, you can look that up if you want to know more about prophecy. The first thing we need to say is that prophecy and prophets, the use of the word doesn't mean the same thing throughout the Bible.

So the terms change from Old Testament to New Testament. For instance, in the Old Testament, it was pretty simple really. You had true prophets and you had false prophets. True prophets came with divine authority to speak the very words of God to people.

[9 : 17] If you disobeyed a prophet, you'd be disobeying God. So we see that in Deuteronomy 18 to 19. God says, I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people.

I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet who shall speak to them everything that I command. And anyone who does not heed the words that the prophets shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable.

So these men, the prophets of the Old Testament, spoke with divine authority. They must be obeyed. Their words must be taken as the very words of God.

That's the way he set it up. False prophets came deceiving people, saying that they had the words of God when they did not.

Deuteronomy 18.20 But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods or who presumes to speak in my name, a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak, that prophet shall die.

[10 : 19] So it's a serious thing to set yourself up as a prophet when you're not or to speak something that is false and say that it's a prophecy from God. When we come to the New Testament, things change a little bit and they get a little bit more complex.

In the New Testament, people who spoke and wrote God's very words and recorded them in scripture were not called prophets, but apostles. When the apostles wanted to establish their unique authority over the church, they didn't appeal to themselves as prophets, but as apostles.

See this in 2 Peter 3.1-2. Hear this. Peter says, He sets them up in the same office.

The apostles were divinely appointed, just like the Old Testament prophets. They spoke with absolute divine authority and wrote the inspired books of the Bible, the canon of the New Testament.

And although the apostolic ministry, that special ministry of apostleship ended when the apostles passed away, at the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that we celebrate today at Pentecost, Acts chapter 2, the Holy Spirit bestowed gifts on the church, enabling people to prophesy revealed messages from the Lord.

[12 : 05] He gave that gift to the church, the gift of prophecy, and it's still being used by God today. Theologian Wayne Grudem, who I mentioned, says this.

These words, prophet and prophecy, were sometimes used of apostles in the context of the Holy Spirit's revealing things to them, like in Revelation chapter 22.

But the words much more commonly referred to ordinary Christians, like you and me, who simply reported something that God had brought to their minds.

So New Testament prophets were ordinary Christians who simply reported something that God had brought to their minds. So we need a third category, don't we?

We're not talking about false prophets or true prophets like in Old Testament times. We're talking about prophets of the New Testament and of the church age now, who had the gift of prophecy.

[13 : 06] They're not the same as the Old Testament prophets, or the apostles, or the Bible authors. The words that they bring, the prophecies aren't equal to, on a level with, or above the scriptures that have been revealed to us, rather than normal Christians who have the spiritual gift of prophecy, which is spirit-prompted, spirit-sustained, scripture-informed, but mixed with human imperfection and therefore in need of sifting, of weighing up.

The words that a prophet brings, if someone comes to me in this church, as they have, and said, I have the gift of prophecy, the Lord has given me a prophecy for this church, for the encouragement, for the edification of this church, which is what the gift of prophecy is for, or, I receive that prophecy and I say, fantastic, this is great news.

God wants to say something to us. He wants to encourage us with this word, but now we need to test it. And so I gather, if I receive the prophecy, I gather our elders here, our pastors, and we look at what's been written, what's been said, and we pray about it, and we weigh it against the scriptures.

That's very important. Listen to 1 Thessalonians 5, 20-21. Be wary against rejecting prophecy out of hand because of its misuse in some contexts.

Listen to Paul. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything, hold fast to what is good. See, by encouraging them to test everything and hold fast to what is good, Paul implies that prophecies can

contain something that's pure and from God and also something that's sinful and tainted from the person who gives it.

[15:04] God is perfect. What he says to us by way of prophecy is perfect, untainted, true, but because we are cracked and sinful vessels, sometimes we can get an interpretation wrong, sometimes we can relay the message incorrectly.

And so Paul says, hold fast to what is good, reject what's wrong, what's bad. And Paul says, don't despise the prophecy because of this.

Don't despise prophecy because it's fallible, because you'd be quenching the Holy Spirit, he says, if we did that. So the same is true in our text.

Let's bring it back to our text this morning. There's two instances where this is true with the prophecies. So 1 Acts 21, 4. Follow along. It says, And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go to Jerusalem.

Through the Spirit they were prophesying to him, do not go to Jerusalem. Now Paul disobeyed this, didn't he? He went to Jerusalem. If prophecy, people who spoke the gift of prophecy, had the gift of prophecy, if what they said came with divine authority like the words of the Bible, then Paul couldn't disobey it, could he?

[16:16] He would have to obey it. He would have to stay where he was. But no, he weighs it. He knows that God has given him a very strong burden to be in Jerusalem in chapter 20.

And so he decides to push on. Also in Acts 21, 10-11, While we were staying there for several days, Luke says, A prophet named Agabus came down from Judea.

He came to us and took Paul's belt, bound it round his feet, bound his own feet and hands with it, and said, Thus says the Holy Spirit, This is the way the Jews in Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.

That's a perfect example, I think, of church age New Testament prophecy in the church. Here's the thing. He was right, but for a few details.

When Paul went to Jerusalem, we read on in Acts, he did get arrested. He did get bound. So this man Agabus has received a picture or a word from God that this is what will happen if Paul goes to Jerusalem.

[17:25] And he's right. He does get some of the details wrong, though. For instance, the Romans, not the Jews, were the ones who bound Paul. He's wrong there. Also, the Jews, rather than delivering him voluntarily, handing him over to the Romans, tried to kill Paul, and Paul had to be rescued by force.

So, the revelation is true. What will happen if Paul goes to Jerusalem is true. Some of the details are wrong. And I think this is what's happened. And this could be what happens in the church today. This man Agabus has been given a revelation from God. The revelation given by God is true and perfect. Perhaps he's seen a picture of Paul bound in Jerusalem.

And then in relaying that message to Paul and the believers, he's got some of the details wrong. He's made his own interpretation. And some of the details aren't quite right.

Do you see how divine revelation comes with divine authority? But because it comes through a cracked vessel like Agabus or like John O. Smith, we need to weigh what's said and sift it for the truth.

[18:33] I think that's a good example of New Testament prophecy right there. So then, how about a definition?

I think the definition of the gift of prophecy in the New Testament and today is a spirit-prompted, spirit-sustained utterance that does not carry intrinsic divine authority and may be mixed with error. Now, some of you might hear this and say, accuse me of making prophecy seem less significant or less edifying or less valuable and I'm not saying that. I believe, to use someone else's label, I'm a charismatic with a seatbelt.

I believe in all the spiritual gifts. I believe they're present in the church today. I think we need to be very wary of how we approach them and how we use them, just as Paul was, with order and according to the scriptures.

And I believe that the gift of prophecy is needed in the church today for the edification of the church. So let me draw an analogy for you, just to make the point.

[19:47] It's the analogy of the gift of teaching. Some people wrongly think that the gift of prophecy is the gift of teaching. That's not true, but I want to draw an analogy between the gift of teaching and

the gift of prophecy.

Now, we in this church, nearly all of us, I think, would have a very high regard for the gift of teaching, wouldn't we? That's what Holy Trinity is known for. Very high view of good, solid Bible teaching.

So, we would all say that when the spiritual gift of teaching is being exercised, that the teaching is prompted and sustained by the Spirit and rooted in the infallible Word of God.

We would say that. We'd say that the gift of teaching is Spirit-prompted, Spirit-sustained. It's an act of explaining the Bible, the biblical truth, for the edification of the church.

That's true. We would say that, I think. And all of us would say that it's tremendously valuable in the life of the church, for the edification of people, for the encouragement of our faith, for our education.

[20 : 51] We would say all those things. But would any of us say that the speech of a teacher when he's exercising the gift of teaching is infallible?

We wouldn't say that. What I'm saying to you now is not infallible. I could be wrong. Would we say that it has divine authority? Well, we'd only say that in a very secondary sense, wouldn't we?

We would say that the Bible that I'm preaching from has divine authority, but not necessarily the words that I'm saying to you. See, the authority that preaching has comes from the authority that's in the Bible, the divine Word of God.

It's a secondary authority. It's derivative. And yet, even though the gift of teaching is fallible and it lacks intrinsic divine authority, we know it's of immense value to the church.

We're edified. We're built up by our teachers. God is in it. It's a spiritual gift. Praise God for teaching. So you see the link.

[22 : 00] You see the analogy. Both gifts, the gift of prophecy and the gift of teaching are gifts that are spirit-prompted, spirit-sustained and rooted in the infallible Word of God in the Scriptures.

But both are nevertheless fallible, mixed with imperfection and only have a secondary derivative authority. And the reason for that is, like I said, it's the vessel.

It's the broken vessel. It's the sinful preacher. It's the sinful prophet. Friends, if we prize the fallible, if we prize the fallible, but edifying gift of teaching in this church, then we shouldn't despise the fallible, but edifying prophecies of spiritually gifted people in this church.

As long as the prophecy is tested and sifted by those in authority, the elders of the church, the pastors of the church, then we shouldn't despise the gift of prophecy nor the prophecies that God has for us according to His will.

Now, we see that being worked out in this passage. Like I said, it's the case of Agabus. Paul hears the man's prophecy. He doesn't rebuke him for bringing a prophecy.

[23 : 27] He accepts it by all accounts as the word of God to him. He knows that if he goes to Jerusalem, he will be arrested.

He will be put on trial. Something bad is going to happen to him there. He's already told the believers in Miletus that he won't see them again. But he weighs up the costs and he decides to go anyway.

Remember, chapter 20, he is constrained by the Spirit. He knows there's a job to be done in Jerusalem. So he weighs it, he accepts it, but he pushes on for the sake of the gospel.

I say that twice to impress on you that it is fruitless to try and compel Paul to stay here by telling him that you have a word from the Lord.

Don't come to him and say, I've got a prophecy, Paul. You need to stay here for another 15 years because like the apostle Paul in chapter 20, Paul, our Paul, feels constrained by the Holy Spirit that God wants him in Asia to do what he's going to do with CMS.

[24 : 43] I think it would take a very extreme sign or wonder to convince Paul not to go. He is constrained and so is Paul. And so he marches on to what has been presented to him as a rough road ahead.

So then he comes to Jerusalem. They finally arrive there. They've taken the horse ride 60 miles inland and he's presented with a problem straight away.

The elders say to him, verse 20 to 21, Now we know that that accusation is false.

That's a rumour that must have started in one of the churches and it's spread around that Paul is against observing Jewish law. Now, Paul is against observing Jewish law for these reasons if these reasons are present.

If people are forced, if Christians are forced to obey the Jewish law as a kind of legalism, he's against that. Christians are free. They have been liberated from the law.

[26 : 07] He doesn't agree, he doesn't think that people should observe the law if they believe that their righteousness comes from the law. No one can observe the law and be righteous. He also doesn't think that anyone should obey the Jewish law if it's motivated by a notion that Jesus' sacrifice is somehow insufficient.

That you have a, Jesus does something and then you've got to obey these laws if you're going to make it to heaven or whatever. Paul's against that kind of legalistic old covenant view of law obedience.

but he's not against anyone obeying the law out of Christian liberty or for the sake of a weaker brother or for the sake of the Jews themselves, the Jewish Christians.

But rather than arguing with the elders, this is interesting because Paul comes across to me as a pretty gruff guy who wouldn't back down from a fight but he doesn't, does he? He doesn't fight, he doesn't argue, he doesn't protest, he doesn't try to prove them wrong, instead he humbles himself. Read verse 22 to 24. The elders say, what then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come, so do what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow.

[27 : 24] Join these men, go through the rite of purification with them and pay for the shaving of their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you but that you yourself observe and guard the law.

And Paul does it. He suffers some kind of compromise of his liberty or insult to his pride and he goes ahead and does it.

Verse 26, Then Paul took the men and the next day having purified himself he entered the temple with them making public the completion of the days of purification when the sacrifice would be made for each of them.

The point is this, Paul practices what he preaches in 1 Corinthians 9. Remember what he says there? To the Jews I became a Jew in order to win the Jews.

To those under the law I became as one under the law though I myself am not under the law so I might win those under the law. I have become all things to all people so that I might by any means save some.

[28 : 33] I do it all for what? For the sake of the gospel so that I may share in its blessings. Paul forgoes his liberty.

Paul suffers maybe some insult to his pride his ego and he embraces that for the sake of the gospel for the sake of unity for the sake of the church for the sake of his Jewish brothers.

Friends, this is how a gospel focused Christian lives. They do everything for the sake of the gospel. They incur insult or forego their liberty associate with people they wouldn't normally associate with, take on ministries that they don't like, give money when they don't have it.

They do these things for the sake of the gospel. Paul embraced suffering and trials and beatings and imprisonments for the sake of the gospel and he's an example to us.

Remember 1 Corinthians chapter 15 Paul there says that if there's no resurrection this is a really important point and I'll leave you with this.

[29 : 56] He says if there's no resurrection if Jesus isn't God if there's no heaven if it's all a lie then Christians are above all people to be pitied.

Above all people to be pitied. You look at his life and that makes sense doesn't it? If there's no Jesus if there's no resurrection if he was hallucinating on the road to Damascus in Acts chapter 9 if he wasn't really saved his life is pitiful.

He's incurring beatings he's forgone all of his training and teaching and his elevated position in the Jewish structure of things in Jerusalem he's forgone all of that he ends up being killed and it's for nothing it's for a lie.

Now what about us today? Can we say the same of our lives? Can someone look at your life and say if there's no Jesus if there's no resurrection if there's no heaven your life is pitiful?

I don't think so for a lot of us. In Australia where we have so much wealth and so much comfort and so many options we can so easily tack on a bit of Christianity and if it was taken away well we've still had 80 plus years of comfort and luxury.

[31 : 26] In the meantime we've been part of a community here and that's a good thing and you know have a cup of tea with someone after the service have relationships who cares if it's not true?

The challenge for us is to live lives that make no sense if there's no Jesus if there's no resurrection there's no reward. What would it look like for your life not to make sense apart from the resurrection?

An example might be giving a lot of money away. Giving a lot of money away to mission organisations or organisations committed to social justice. That makes no sense if there's no Jesus. If there's no God why would we do good to anyone? Let alone give away our money that we could spend on ourselves for our own comfort. Giving money. So often I think people in churches with good intentions misplaced encourage people not to give too much so that their comfort isn't disturbed when I think God welcomes a cheerful sacrificial giver.

That might be an example. Also being involved in the ministry here in some way. I know it can be frustrating being a volunteer at a church. Having to deal with pastors and paid staff.

[32 : 50] It's a nightmare. And having to deal with other volunteers and so many people. The church would be a great place if there was no people, wouldn't it? It would be perfect. You incur some discomfort and a cost by being involved here, giving of your time, giving of your expertise, of your gifts.

That kind of life doesn't make sense if there's no Jesus. How about this? You could leave your pretty comfortable, well-respected, long-term job as the lead pastor of a leading evangelical church in the Melbourne Diocese.

Are you with me? You could leave that job and go overseas to a foreign region, where you might be lonely, might take a long time to adjust, you may not have the comforts that you're used to here, you won't have the same relationships that you have here.

You could do that for the sake of the gospel. Paul going away to Asia, Paul going with CMS as a missionary makes no sense, no sense, God's love.

If there's no Jesus, no reward, does it? We could say the same of every missionary that's ever lived just about.

[34 : 23] No one's upgrading on their lifestyle to go and do missionary service. So think about it, think about it. If Jesus is taken away from your life and nothing changes, you need to do some serious thinking about adjusting your goals, adjusting your path in this life.

It's a challenge. We need to live lives like Paul did from Acts chapter 9 onwards that make no sense apart from the resurrection. That we as Christians, if there's no resurrection, above all people we are to be pitied.

I'm going to leave you with that and pray for you. Let's pray together. Dear Father, we thank you so much. We remember on this day of Pentecost, that great day when you gave your Holy Spirit to the church.

We thank you for the gifts that you give us through the Holy Spirit. Gifts of teaching and gifts of prophecy and many, many other gifts that you give. I pray that we wouldn't despise those gifts, that we wouldn't hide them, that we wouldn't oppress them, that we would use them for the sake of the gospel.

We thank you for Paul and the example that he gives us of a life well lived for Jesus. I pray that today as we leave this place, you wouldn't let us rest, but that you would cause us to think long and hard about our lives, the direction that they're going in, that we might adjust the way we live, our attitude to life, the amount of money we give, the job that we work in, every area of our life, that we would adjust it so that everything functions for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of Jesus.

[36 : 21] Please encourage us to do that today, I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.