

Hearing God's voice for others : the gift of prophecy

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Date: 18 October 2026

Preacher: John Winter

[0:00] Well, good morning, everybody. We're in Acts of the Apostles. We're going to read together from Acts to begin with. I'm not so much preaching on a text, but on a topic, which is always for me a bit of a fool's errand, because I'm never going to be able to do it in the time that I have.

And I'm not going to be able to share everything that I have here. So I'll probably put out my notes afterwards for anybody that wants them, because this is a big topic, and we're only spending this Sunday on it, though the application of it will take some time.

But we're going to read together Acts chapter 21. It'll be on the screen, verses 7 to 14, and then pick up the reading at 27 to 35. I'll actually, just for context, read from verse 7.

We continued our voyage from Tyre and landed at Ptolemaeus when we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for a day. Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the Evangelist, one of the seven.

He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied. After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. Coming over to us, he took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it, and said, The Holy Spirit says, In this way, the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.

[1:37] When we heard this, we and the people who were there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, Why are you weeping and breaking my heart?

I am ready not only to be bound but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. When he would not be dissuaded, we give up and said, The Lord's will be done.

And then we're going to read further from verse 27 to 35. When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple.

So he's now in Jerusalem. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, shouting, Men of Israel, help us. This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against our people and our law and this place.

And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple area and defiled this holy place. They had previously seen Trophimus, the Ephesian, in the city with Paul and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple area.

[2:45] The whole city was aroused and the people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple and immediately the gates were shut.

While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar. He at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd.

When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains.

Then he asked who he was and what he had done. Some in the crowd shouted one thing, some another. And since the commander could not get the truth because of the uproar, he ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks.

When Paul reached the steps, the violence of the mob was so great, he had to be carried by the soldiers. The crowd that followed kept shouting, Away with him.

[3:46] Amen. And the Lord will bless to us the reading of his word. Now you just have to park that and we'll come back to it. Okay, park it and come back to it. Now, today we're talking about hearing God's voice for others or the gift of prophecy.

Hearing God's voice for others or the gift of prophecy. God still speaks today. Not simply through the pages of scripture, but through a variety of ways which we'll see.

One of the ways in which God speaks to his church is through the gift of prophecy. In 1 Corinthians 14 verse 1, Paul says, Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.

Because God wants to talk. He wants to speak. It has always been God's way. I mean, when you think of God in the Garden of Eden, He used to meet with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day and He would speak to them.

And when you read through the Bible, you'll discover that God likes to speak. And speak directly to individuals as well as to a nation.

[4:55] He spoke through prophets generally to a nation. But He spoke to individuals to give them guidance and direction in their lives. And the good news is He still does that today.

Now, C.H. Spurgeon, who is a particular favorite preacher of mine, he didn't believe that God spoke through the gift of prophecy.

He's what we call a cessationist. Now, cessationism is the idea that the spiritual gifts referenced in 1 Corinthians 12 through 14 are no longer relevant today.

That there came a time, usually when Scripture was completed, what we call the canonization of Scripture, there came a time when the need for revelatory gifts disappeared.

And we had what they think of as the Word of God, as sufficient and perfect. The perfect has come, which they interpret to be Scripture, and therefore God no longer speaks.

[6:00] That is a position that has been held for a long time by a lot of very faithful people who trust in God and want God's best for their lives. I just happen to think they're mistaken.

In this church, we are what are called continuists. That is to say, we believe that the gifts of the Spirit still continue today, and God still works, speaking to His church through a variety of ways, including through the gifts of the Spirit, gifts of revelation, gifts like tongues and prophecy, and the interpretation of tongues, and the discernment of spirits, and so on.

So that is the position that I adopt. But Spurgeon was not like me. He was not a continuous, he was a cessationist. Except God used him in very powerful ways, in spite of his beliefs.

So let me give you just a couple of examples. Spurgeon was preaching to a crowd of over 10,000 people in London. When he was preaching, he was prompted by the Spirit to point to a young man in the congregation.

Imagine this. He pointed to a young man in the congregation, and he said, Young man, those gloves you are wearing have not been paid for. You've stolen them from your employer.

[7:18] Imagine that. Imagine if you were here, and you'd nicked something off your employer, and then the preacher pointed it out. Well, the young man was horrified. And at the end of the meeting, he went to the vestry, and he said, It's the first time I have robbed my master, and I will never do it again.

You won't expose me, sir, will you? But of course, Spurgeon spoke to him of the fact that although he did not know it was not written in his notes, the Holy Spirit had prompted him, in quite a miraculous way, to speak prophetically into the life of an individual.

Now, he didn't do it just once. He did it numerous times. There was another very famous incident when he said to a congregation, a vast congregation, There is a man sitting here who is a shoemaker.

He keeps his shop open on Sundays. It was open last Sabbath morning. He took nine pence, and there was four pence profit out of it. His soul is sold to Satan for four pence.

The city missionary, who was a member of the church, went from there and visited the shoemaker. The shoemaker said, He was entirely accurate.

[8:42] I did take nine pence that day, and four pence was just the profit. But how he should know that, I could not tell. Then it struck me that it was God who had spoken to my soul through him.

So I shut up my shop the next Sunday. At first I was afraid to go again to hear him, lest he should tell the people more about me. But afterwards I went, and the Lord met with me and saved my soul. Now, whether Spurgeon believed in the gift of prophecy or not, he rather foolishly forgot that he was exercising it. And actually in his autobiography, he tells us that he did so many, many times.

You've got it on the screen. I could tell as many as a dozen similar cases in which I pointed at somebody in the hall without having the slightest knowledge of the person or any idea that what I

said was right, except that I believed I was moved by the Spirit to say it.

And so striking has been my description that the persons have gone away and said to friends, come see a man that told me all things that I ever did. Beyond a doubt, he must have been sent of God to my soul, or else he could not have described me so exactly.

[10:00] And that, my friends, is what prophecy really is. It is a foretelling, sometimes a foretelling, of what God wants to say to individuals.

And it doesn't happen rarely. It commonly happens in preaching. I don't know how many times I've heard people say to me after a sermon, I felt that you were speaking just to me.

Or I felt that God was speaking just to me. And they said, how did you know that about me? Well, I didn't know that about you. It's kind of reassuring in a way. It's not like I've done my homework and researched you on Facebook and then come up with things to say to you.

God still speaks today. And God speaks powerfully and prophetically. And when He speaks directly to you, that is when the Word of God lives in you.

That is hearing God's voice. Now, you may hear God's voice audibly. That's not necessarily something you won't do. But it's not the common way you hear.

[11:11] But you will hear within your own soul and conscience God speaking to you. And you just know. Because circumstances and events that have taken place in your life will begin to be directed toward you.

Or somebody will come up to you and say something and you know that that was just what you needed to hear. God speaks very powerfully. Indeed, I am a preacher of the gospel because God spoke directly to me.

I've told you this story when I was at Newcastle City Hall and Eric Dell, the Baptist minister, said, John, go. Now, he was reading from, I think it was Luke's gospel. And he was reading about John the Baptist.

But it came to my heart, very powerfully, John, go. It was a direction. God was speaking. He was speaking.

And I was listening. And that was a prophetic word then to me because it was foretelling and forth-telling.

[12:16] It was foretelling my future. And I'm still here all of these years later. I was 18 at the time. And it was foretelling what was going to happen.

That is what prophecy is. It always has been that. In the Old Testament and New Testament, it has been a combination of foretelling and foretelling. So how does God speak?

Next slide. Well, he speaks through various means. God speaks through creation. You know, when you go out and you see a beautiful panoramic scene and you think, wow, you look up at the stars and you think, wow, I'm so small compared to that.

And you feel this sense of awe and wonder. And you think somebody must have made that. That is God speaking to you. The heavens declare the glory of God. And Paul in Romans 1 says, that is why people are without excuse because they try to deny God's existence.

But how can they explain all of this? God speaks through Scripture. All Scripture is God-breathed, he says to Paul. To Timothy.

[13:21] And is profitable for correction, for training in righteousness, for rebuke, that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. God speaks to us through the Bible.

He speaks to us as well through Jesus, the living Word. That is why when you meet Christians here, you meet people who talk about talking to Jesus and having a relationship with Jesus.

That is why this vision, our vision statement is that we as followers of Jesus want to be with Jesus, become like Jesus and do what Jesus does.

Because Jesus is real to us. And we talk to him, pray to him, worship him, in an ongoing relationship with him.

The living Christ, the living Word of God still speaks. And it is through the living Word of God that God has declared to us. God speaks to us through the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus has left with us, another of the same, who brings us into a knowledge of all truth, who whispers the truth into our hearts and helps us to see why this is true.

[14:32] So you get those moments, don't you, in your life, and you maybe remember when the Bible meant nothing at all to you. But then you begin to get messages from God.

You begin to hear God speaking to you. Perhaps it isn't directly through the Bible, but something comes up on your Facebook page or something happens in your life, something terrible you avoid, and you think God is speaking.

He's working out the circumstances, and the Spirit is speaking into your heart. And then through people, through other people, through prayer, through preaching, through worship, through conversation, through encouragement, God is speaking, endlessly speaking.

For he likes to speak to us, not just through the Bible, but through all of these means as well. Peter Gregg says, the Bible says that you were born to enjoy a real conversational relationship with God, a real conversational relationship with God.

It's a wonderful privilege. You were born for that. You were made for that. And if God is not speaking to you, then you're not living the life that God intended for you.

[15 : 47] I expect God to speak. I listen for him. I get up in the morning to meet with him, so that he may speak words to me.

And Jesus says, we are like his sheep. And he says, my sheep hear my voice. They follow me, and I give them eternal life, and they will never perish.

And then he said something really important as well. He says, they will not listen to the voice of a stranger, because you see, as the Holy Spirit is within us, we begin to discern his voice from the voices of unbelief and from the voices that would lead us astray.

And that is why we hear things. We think, well, that's not quite right. Or we hear voices that are seeking to lead us into sin, and we think, no, I shouldn't do that, because God's voice is speaking. From Genesis, at the very beginning of the Bible, through all of the prophets, right through the Old Testament, right to the book of Revelation, which is a prophecy, it's the only prophecy, unique prophecy, in the New Testament, it's called a prophecy.

[16 : 58] Right through the end of Revelation, God is speaking. And the question always is, are we listening? Are we listening?

God is speaking. Are we listening? So this gift of prophecy is important. Paul in Thessalonians 5, verse 20 says, do not despise prophecies.

And then he says, test everything, and hold on to what is good. Now that's important, because when people claim to have a message from God for you, when they want to speak to you that message, you have to ask yourself, is this in accordance with the truth of Scripture or not?

Is God speaking to me, or is this just the voice of a human being? And it's very difficult to work out sometimes. But we are to test everything, and only to hold fast on what is good.

Now, you will see from Agabus in a moment that that language is really important for discerning prophecy. But let me give you another historic example, and I'm giving it from Scottish covenanters.

[18 : 16] This is going back historically a little while. But Scottish coventers, they're all Presbyterians. You wouldn't expect them to be the sort of people that would be all happy, clappy, and singing and dancing, and all of that.

They're quite duer people by and large, sing psalms and everything else. Alexander Paden was a covenanter. And he was asked as a minister to marry a man called John Brown to a lady called Isabel Weir.

And at their wedding ceremony, he said, you have got a good man to be your husband, but you will not enjoy him long. Keep linen by you for his winding sheet, and it will be a bloody one.

Well, thank you very much. Welcome to my wedding. Your husband's going to die, and he's going to die a violent death. In May 1685, John Brown was executed by the English soldiers.

When he was executed, Alexander Paden was miles away. And when he was miles away in the company of others, he shouted out, Lord, when will you avenge the blood of John Brown?

[19 : 36] Weeks later, it was discovered that he said this just after John Brown had been executed. Now, there was no way he could know that. And that's not just one story.

That's many stories that were unique at that time. When they were going through all of this persecution, the Covenant, as they experienced extraordinary words from God, extraordinary gifts of the Spirit.

And so, what I'm showing you here, that this is not just like something within the charismatic brand of the church. This is something God does to speak into particular situations in extraordinary ways and reveal things that you could not know.

So, very quickly, what is prophecy? Prophecy is the prediction of future events, the revelation of hidden matters. It is inspired exhortation, and it is direction, encouragement, or warning from God. Now, that is true in the Old Testament as well as the New. It is a combination of foretelling things that could not know, that only God could know, and foretelling God's will.

[20 : 53] It is a combination of those two things. And that is why it's not just preaching, because it's revealing what the preacher could not know. Second question, is prophecy in the New Testament the same as that in the Old?

The answer is, yes, it is. And, a bit frustratingly, no, it's not. So, first of all, yes, it is. It is because all those elements were there, the foretelling of the future events, the declaring of God's will for the present, the proclamation, the explanation of Christian doctrine or Old Testament truth, and the revealing of hidden matters.

But not every prophet who spoke from God had their words written down. So, we know about Nathan the prophet. He came to David.

He called David out for committing adultery with Bathsheba, and that was recorded. But presumably, Nathan said many prophetic things that were not recorded. And so, what we need to see is there are prophets that were written down, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, et cetera, and then the 12 minor prophets, and then the book of Revelation, it was written down.

But then, in Corinthians, there were people who prophesied who never had anything written down. And their prophecy was of a different type. It was not canonical.

[22 : 21] It was not to be recorded for all time so that the people of God for generations afterwards could hear it. It was specific and local. Local words given to direct people.

And the details of those things we don't know much about except Agabus. Agabus is a very interesting example of prophecy, I think. Because Agabus comes into a situation, Paul's thinking, I'm going to go to Jerusalem, and then they say to him, he gets up, he gets his belt, binds his hand, and says, you shouldn't go.

At least, that's what the people presumed, he shouldn't go. Why should he go off to Jerusalem? He's going to get bound, that's no good. We want the gospel to spread. And they try to prevail on him.

Don't go, Paul, don't go. Paul said, I'm going to go because the Lord has revealed to me that this is the way it should be for me. And so, off he went. Agabus told him that if he went, he would be bound by the Jews and handed over to the Romans.

Romans. When he got there, the Jews tried to kill him and the Romans rescued him. The details were not right. Agabus saw that Paul was going to get arrested, but he didn't get all the details right, as we've seen.

[23 : 42] Now, that's not a problem because this is one thing that we need to realize about prophetic words. He may have been given what we call a picture.

He saw Paul bound and in the presence of Romans, and so he gave the word. The word was essentially true. The core message was true. Some of the details weren't quite right.

That didn't matter. It still came about. It was still a prophetic word. And this is what should distinguish prophecy that is canonical from that which takes place in church.

It is unwise, I would submit to you, for anybody to say in the church today, directing, I don't know, Sarah, about whether she should buy a house or not, or John, about whether he should take that job.

It would be very unwise for us to say, thus saith the Lord. But if you get an impulse from the Holy Spirit and you think, I think God is saying, that is probably wise.

[24 : 46] I think God is saying. You're not trusting the human author. You're not suggesting you've got all the details right. You don't believe you're Jeremiah or Isaiah. But you think, God is giving you an impulse.

He's giving you a message for somebody. You don't necessarily know who it's for. So you might write it down and then you might pop it over to John and say, John, this may be for somebody. That's absolutely fine.

And what will John do? Well, John will, with the elders, perhaps, weigh that message. and see whether it is in accordance with Scripture. For my responsibility and the responsibility of leadership in the church is to test all things and to hold fast to what is good.

And if that word is not contrary to Scripture, then we will share it. If there's somebody specific, we will share it. If they're not specific, we may share it more generally.

We've done both in this church. You might have noticed when it happens, people will come up and they'll whisper something in one of our ears. One of the others says, is it all right for me to share this?

[25:55] And then we hear what they're going to say. And then we say, yes, or occasionally, no, but it's most often, yes. God speaks today and may speak directly through a situation that's important to hear, but it has to be carefully listened to, carefully weighed before it's shared.

Why does Paul say eagerly desire spiritual gifts? Because it is part of last day's ministry. And it should operate in the church.

And it is more important, he says, in tongues, which, because tongues is not easy to understand without an interpreter, which is a clear word in the language of the people that gives guidance to what God is saying.

It should be spoken, it should be normative within the church, but it should be under control, and it should be two or at the most three, and always under the guidance and direction of those who sit in oversight of the church's ministry.

God speaks today. Are we listening? So then, how do we respond to what God is saying? How do we respond?

[27:26] How should prophecy operate in the church? Well, we should pray for the gift. We should practice it in accordance with Scripture. We should operate in love and community.

It's fine to encourage and exhort if we're going to rebuke and correct. There may be a place for that, but that would need to be carefully weighed before that was said, because that can come sometimes from people's frustration about church not going in the direction they would like, and so we would need to carefully weigh that, not refuse it, because it may be from God.

It must be overseen by the church leadership, and importantly, you must never base your decisions in life on prophecy alone. The interesting thing about the Agabus case is that the church, some of the church, thought, this is God telling us that Paul should avoid going.

And Paul thought, this is God telling me I should go. Now, who was right? Well, we assume Paul. But had Paul chosen to follow the advice of the church, which he could have done, would he have been wrong?

Do you know, I once had a woman in the congregation who told me that she was given a prophecy from a person who claimed to be a prophet, and she was so frightened by it, that she folded it up and put it in a drawer in her desk and kept it there for years and felt under the weight and condemnation of it.

[29:04] I never saw the message. She said to me, what should I do with it? I said, I think you should tear it up. I don't believe you're bound by such words.

We are bound by Scripture, but those kinds of prophetic words, even if they come from God, are contextual and localized and not to be kept as if they're Scripture.

They were given for a specific time. If the time has passed, then the message is between you and God. What you do with it is between you and God.

That's important. So how then do we apply it to ourselves today? Prophecy is given for strengthening, Paul says, encouragement and comfort.

God teaches us to eagerly desire this gift. to encourage, strengthen and comfort them.

[30:14] Let us, like Samuel of old, say, Lord, speak, for I am listening. And let us, if we're given a message that we think is for others, be prepared to submit it to them or if it's generally for the church, to the leadership of the church and trust that if God wants it said, it will be said.

And if not, if I've not heard him correctly, then I am patient to accept that God may not want it said at the moment. Let us pray.