

Prophecy

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Preacher: Thomas Davis

[0 : 00] Well, tonight we are continuing our study on the gifts of the Spirit, which we've been looking at over the past few weeks. It's an amazing topic for us to study because it's teaching us how God Himself, God the Holy Spirit, is at work in and through people like you in order to build up His church.

As we look through these gifts, we are trying to make sure that we keep four fundamental truths in our minds. And they're listed there for you, that the gifts of the Spirit are given by God.

They're for His glory, and they are many and diverse. So there's lots of different gifts, lots of different ways in which God is glorified. Number two, the gifts of the Spirit are for the building up of the church as we all work together.

A key principle is that the gifts are not self-centered, they are others centered. Number three, the gifts of the Spirit have common elements for all believers, but unique aspects for only some.

So there's a sense in which all of the gifts reflect imperatives that are applicable to us all, but yet within that there are people who have particular gifts in particular areas.

[1 : 08] And then number four, all of the gifts of the Spirit are worthless and useless without love.

We've looked at apostles, we've looked at evangelists, we've looked at pastor teachers, and tonight we are going to look at prophets. And we'll start by reading again from Ephesians 2.

So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone in whom the whole structure being joined together grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

I'm going to make a prophecy at the start, there's no way I'm going to be finished at half past, but we'll try and get there as close as we can. We won't be too long, but we'll look at this together.

Just to note at the start, we're going to look at prophets and prophecy as two aspects of one gift. And there's just two things I want to say. I want to say first of all that the gift of prophecy is a bit controversial, and then secondly I want to say that the gift of prophecy is very exciting.

[2 : 19] So that's our two headings as we study together tonight. So first of all, we're going to just dive straight in and address the fact that the gift of prophecy is a controversial subject in the church. And the reason it's controversial is because it's the source of many different opinions.

So some say that prophecy has ceased, others say that it continues. Some say prophecy is preaching, some say prophecy is having insight into future events, some say prophecy is getting guidance, others that it's having clear understanding of Scripture, others that it's to give warnings, others that it's God's authoritative revelation, a bit like a continuation of the Bible.

Some say that Old Testament and New Testament prophecy is the same thing. Some people say that Old Testament and New Testament prophecy is a different thing. There are loads of different views.

And there's no agreement in the pew. So you could go to lots of different churches in Edinburgh and Scotland and find lots of different views on prophecy. And there's no agreement in the academy.

And New Testament scholars of the highest caliber have come to different conclusions on this. So where do we start in all of this complexity?

[3 : 32] Well, I think the first thing to do is to ask the question, what is a prophet? And we tend, I think, to come to the, to jump to the conclusion that a prophet is somebody who predicts the future.

So we talk about somebody who has this insight into future events and we say that's, they're a prophet in terms of seeing what lies ahead. And of course, that arises, I think, in many ways from the fact that a lot of what the Old Testament prophet said was looking forward.

And it was predicting events that were to come, particularly events that were fulfilled in Jesus. But it's important to recognize that the primary role of a prophet, whether it's Old Testament, New Testament, the primary role is not prediction.

The primary role of a prophet is to be God's spokesperson. So in the Old Testament, prophets would frequently begin their words with the phrase, thus says the Lord.

And their job was to communicate God's message on God's behalf. Sometimes that was prediction, but more often it was times to warn people or to encourage people or to teach them.

[4 : 44] The key point is that a prophet is somebody who communicated what God wanted to say to the people. So when you hear that word, prophet, I want you to think spokesperson.

Prophecy is a big theme of the Bible. It's big in the Old Testament. It's big in the New, as we'll see shortly. But there's no agreement on how that gift actually works now in the church.

And even if you go to the New Testament, it says loads about prophecy. But yet it's hard to be actually clear exactly what it says. Here's just a list of things that the New Testament says.

There's much more than this. I was studying all the different places where prophets are mentioned. And so it tells us there's loads of prophets. So here's some names. Paul is a prophet. Barnabas, Lucius, Simeon, Manny, Encilus, Judas, Agabus.

They're all named as prophets. They were women prophets, so Phillips' four daughters. They were prophets. Prophecy is there to build up the church. Prophecy is not to be despised. Prophecy is to be desired.

[5 : 48] Prophecy is a sign for believers. Prophecy reveals the mystery of Christ. Prophecy is greater than interpreting tongues. Prophecy comes from God, not man. Prophecy should be done decently and orderly.

Prophecy is going to stop. So there's a lot of information in one slide. And that's just a selection of some of the things that the New Testament reveals.

But even though the New Testament says a lot about prophecy, there are still questions remaining. Is prophecy always an authoritative revelation of God's word?

So when Isaiah in the Old Testament says, thus says the Lord, that's authoritative. Is it always like that? Is it like that today? Is prophecy guidance for specific circumstances in our lives?

So can you get a prophecy to tell you what job you're going to have? Is prophecy in the Old Testament the same as prophecy in the New Testament? And even in the New Testament itself, is the word prophecy always referring to the same thing?

[6 : 47] And perhaps the biggest question of all, has prophecy ceased or are there still prophets today? It's a bit of a complicated situation, lots of different views.

To help us summarize all of this, I think we can put the various viewpoints into four categories. And for each of these categories, I want us to think in terms of two layers. I want us to think in terms of revelation and in terms of guidance.

Now when I say revelation, I mean an authoritative message from God that is infallible, the word of God. And when I talk about guidance, I'm referring to decision making and to events that take place in our lives.

So I'm going to put up a slide with a table which reflects a spectrum of views. So options one, two, three and four. Now please note this is a summary and there's loads of variations in all of this.

This is not the definitive systematic theology of prophecy, it's just the one slide summary. Option one, we'll say that revelation is complete, prophecy has ceased, guidance does not happen except through reading your Bible.

[7 : 57] Option two, revelation is complete, prophecy has ceased, but God does still lead us and guide us by His Spirit, but it's not prophecy. Option three, revelation is complete, prophecy has ceased in that sense.

However, prophecy does continue at a lower level, God guides us by prophecy, but it's not infallible, it can contain errors. Option number four, revelation is continuing, so authoritative prophecy still happens and that authoritative prophecy can give us guidance.

Options one and two would probably be called cessationist, the idea of something has ceased. Options three and four would be called continuationist in the idea that it's continuing as I'm sure you guessed.

So option one, if you were in option one, you would say that prophecy today is just really preaching as we just declare God's word, that's prophecy.

And somebody holding that view would be very skeptical and very cautious about any claimed prophetic statements today or any unusual modes of guidance that happen either today or in the history of the church.

[9 : 10] It's like a very cautious view. Option two would say that we can still be guided by the Spirit today, we're led by Him in our lives, but it's not prophecy.

So examples of that might be the person who feels burdened to pray for somebody or the person who wants to share a verse with somebody or even the preacher who changes what they're going to preach at the last minute because they feel that they want to say something else.

There's an openness to being guided, but it wouldn't be classified as prophecy. Option three would say that there's two levels of prophecy.

So one level we could maybe call prophecy with a capital P and that's the message of the biblical prophets who spoke the infallible word of God like Isaiah in the Old Testament or Paul in the New.

But alongside that, there's a lower level of prophecy. So you could maybe say prophecy with a small P and that's still a prophetic message of God, but it's not infallible. It's not at the same level and it can contain errors.

[10 : 14] And the example that people in option three will use is that of a prophet called Agabus in Acts chapter 20 and their argument is that Agabus prophesied that Paul would be arrested by the Jews, but in actual fact he was arrested by the Romans.

And so the argument is, well, that prophecy wasn't quite accurate, so there's a lower level of prophecy. And then option four would say that God still speaks through prophets.

So just as God spoke through men like Jeremiah and spoke through apostles and prophets like Paul, he carries on speaking today in the same way. And there's been lots of examples of that throughout history and way, way, way, way, way back in the second century, there was a group of people called the mountainists and they had prophets and one of them was a lady called Maximilla and she said, after me there will be no more prophecy but the end.

So unless she's still alive and is 1,847 years old, she may not have been right. But even today there's still people who claim to receive direct authority of revelation from God.

So that's the summary. Which one's right? Which one are you? Which one am I? Well, I'll tell you which one I am.

[11 : 36] I'll put my head on the block. I'm number two. And I've got two reasons why I am a number two.

The first is what we read in Ephesians chapter two, the fact that prophecy is foundational. So you'd say it's there right in the middle, that your fellow citizens, members of the household, have got built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.

So we use that verse as an argument to say that there's no apostles today because they were foundational. If that's the case, exactly the same thing applies to prophets. They have a foundational role.

And to me that makes sense, to me that makes perfect sense because to the early church they didn't have a Bible. They didn't have the completed New Testament in their hands.

So the gift of prophecy functioned to allow God to speak to the people in order to teach them and build them up. And by the time the New Testament scriptures were complete, that need was no longer there.

[12 : 39] So that's reason number one, what it says there. The second reason I would hold to option two is that I believe the Bible is a complete revelation and it must not be added to.

And if we claim prophecy today, especially if we claim authoritative prophecy today, then we're calling into question the authority of the Bible. If someone says that they've got this revelation from God, does that mean that the Bible is incomplete?

That's the kind of question it raises. Now that does not mean that I don't think that God guides us. I believe God does guide us. He leads us as we pray, as we read the Bible, as events unfold in our lives.

He gives us discernment all the time we are growing in wisdom as we are being made more like Jesus. And above all, I would want to say and really highlight that God is sovereign.

And although we've got these boxes here, I would never, ever, ever put God into one of those boxes because God can work in the ways that He wants.

[13 : 42] And there may be times, particularly where the Gospel is breaking new ground that He could be at work in remarkable ways.

But I do, I have to just say, and you don't need to agree with me, I'm just giving you my opinion, I struggle with the idea of two levels of prophecy.

I think that when you look at the example of Agabus in chapter 20 of Acts, I think that, I don't think Luke is trying to tell us that his prophecy was accurate.

If anything, I think he's assuming that it was accurate. I think as you look at the passage, you can see that what's prophesied and what's fulfilled and the way the narrative goes, it all seems to match up, but certainly not trying to show that the prophecy was wrong in terms of what Luke is saying.

Luke, in other words, doesn't think that he was wrong in the way that he's written it. And of course, if you have the lower level of prophecy, then that raises a big question, which parts are right and which parts aren't?

[14 : 48] So you say, yes, you can have a prophecy, here it is, but some parts are right, some parts are wrong. Well, I would maybe be, maybe I'm being a bit picky, but I would just say, well, which parts are right and which parts are wrong?

And the only way you can know is to test it against Scripture. But of course, if you're testing everything against Scripture and you only believe the Scriptural parts, then why do you need the prophecy?

Because you've got the Scripture there to tell you and there to guide you. That would make sense to me before the church had the Scriptures and prophecy was a vital part of the New Testament church, but it makes less sense now.

Okay, now that my head is on the block, I do want to just highlight two really important points. If you look at those two layers, Revelation and guidance, I would say that in terms of guidance, we cannot be definitive.

So although I'm saying that I think option two is right, option one might be right and option three might be right. And they've all got strong points and they've all got weak points.

[15 : 54] And that's why the whole question of prophecy is not clear because each argument has got strong points, each argument has got weak points. So the weak point in option one is the fact that that option has to pretty much dismiss all the times when people feel led to say something or if somebody's been converted through a dream or if something remarkable happens where there's the sense of knowing what's going to happen, you have to just say, no, no, that none of that is actually happening.

That's a big claim to make. Option two allows for those sorts of things, but somebody can ask the question, well, if it's not prophecy, what is it?

And that's a question that's quite difficult to answer. And option three, as we said, it's got the problem of saying, well, how do you know what's right and wrong in the lower level of prophecy?

Does the New Testament really teach that there's two levels of prophecy? It's not very easy to prove that it does. So in terms of guidance, I don't think I would be hesitant in being dogmatic.

And really, really, I would say that options two and options three are very, very close to each other.

[17 : 09] And in some cases, it might even be terminological. So they really are very close to one another. So in the area of guidance, we just have to be open, I think.

In the area of revelation, in terms of authoritative revelation from God that is at the level of Scripture, we have to be absolutely definitive and say that revelation is complete.

So while I'm at two and I've got sympathy with options one and options three, I am very, very nervous and very cautious about option four.

Because to say that you've received a prophecy from God that's of the same level of the Bible, that's a big claim to make. And I think it's actually a dangerous claim to make, because if you do that, if you claim direct authoritative revelation, then you are immediately confronting your listeners with a drastic choice.

They either have to listen to every word that you say, or they have to regard you as a false prophet. You should know in between, if someone stands up and says, God has told me to say this, then they're making a big, big claim.

[18 : 35] And that's something that we have to be cautious about. And many people have stood up and made these kind of claims over the years, especially about the second coming. Apparently the world was supposed to end on 23 April this year.

It hasn't reached Scotland yet, but it's, maybe it was somewhere else. But I saw a quick Google and you'll find all sorts of claims. But if you think about it, it's just, if common sense tells you, if someone stands up and says the world is going to end on the 10th of October 2018, that person is either speaking with the voice of God or he's a liar.

One or the other. And that's why claims to authority to prophecy is dangerous, very dangerous. And I think Jesus warned us about this when he said, beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

Prophecy is an area where we have to be very careful because we need to always remember that God's message is life giving, but a false message is deadly.

And so for me and for our church, the unique authority of the Bible is a non-negotiable.

[19 : 50] It's a non-negotiable. But that does not mean that we hate people who don't agree with us. And I'm sure that, I'm sure many of you are not in complete agreement with me.

And I completely understand that and completely respect that. And this is a debate that will go on until the second coming. And we certainly don't hate the people who don't hold the same view as us.

But I would just say this, that whatever you view on prophecy is, always just make sure that you never say anything and never listen to anything that contradicts the Bible.

That's the golden rule that we have to keep in mind. So that's the controversial bit about prophecy. I want to just move on quickly to the exciting bit, but you're maybe going to say, well, okay, Thomas, if prophecy have ceased, then what's the relevance for us today?

And certainly, how can it be exciting if it's all not there anymore? Well, I think that the gift of prophecy is very relevant to us still. And in fact, it's immensely relevant.

[20 : 55] But in order to see that, we need to look at how prophecy functions across the Bible as a whole. And that's what I want us to spend the last few minutes thinking about.

As I'm sure you all know, the Bible is split into two big parts. Old Testament, New Testament, or to give them their proper names, Old Covenant and New Covenant.

That's really what the word Testament means. At the heart of both of these sections is the story of humanity's relationship with God.

The word covenant means talking about a relationship between us and God, whereby God is our God. We are His people. When you hear the word covenant, think relationship.

And so you've got the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, the two together make up the whole Bible. Now, I want to notice something important, first of all, that when we talk about the relationship between the Old and the New Covenant, we are not talking about a relationship of replacement.

[21 : 58] We are talking about a relationship of fulfillment. So when you think Old Covenant and New Covenant, don't think of it like getting a new car. Because when you get a new car, you get rid of your old one and you get a new one and it's completely different.

That's not the relationship between the Old and New Testament. It's more like the relationship between primary school and high school, or between childhood and adulthood, where one replaces the other, but in the sense of fulfilling and completing the other.

There's this great progression from the Old into the New. So the Bible is Old Covenant and New Covenant, and prophecy is a massive part in both of these, because the prophets functioned as God's covenant spokespersons.

So in terms of the relationship between God and humanity, these prophets, men and women, were used by God to communicate God's message to the people with whom he's in a covenant relationship.

So in the Old Testament, God raised up lots of prophets. Here's a list of most of them. I won't read them all out, but I'm sure those names are familiar to you.

[23 : 12] They were all God's covenant spokespersons, and they all have one thing in common. They all spoke into disastrous situations.

So when Elijah and Elisha spoke, the kingdom was in the grip of idolatry under Ahab and Jezebel. When Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, and Amos spoke, the northern kingdom was about to be obliterated by the Assyrian Empire.

When Jonah and Nahum prophesied, the great city of Nineveh was threatened with destruction. When Jeremiah, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Joel probably, although we don't know exactly when Joel was written, and Ezekiel prophesied that the city of Jerusalem was about to be destroyed and the people were being taken into exile.

And when Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi prophesied, they were trying to rebuild a shattered nation which was returning from exile in Babylon. All these prophets spoke into disastrous situations.

And indeed, a great theme of the Old Testament is not success, it's failure and disaster. And a key part of the prophet's job was to warn the people about what they were doing.

[24 : 23] The Old Testament prophets served as warning men. That's really what they came to do. They kept telling the people not to abandon God. Here's an example from Second Kings. The Lord warned Israel by every prophet and every seer, saying, turn from your evil ways.

But as verse 14 says, they would not listen. And so the Old Testament prophets brought a message of judgment to a people that were rejecting God.

However, alongside that message of judgment, there was always a message of hope. God did not send these prophets just to deliver a great big, I told you so from God.

To say, I told you that if you turned away disaster would strike and see, disaster is striking. And so when the prophets were sent, he sent the prophets because he wanted to call the people back.

And so we hear that the words of Joel chapter two, God talks about judgment coming the day of the Lord is coming, darkness and gloom, thick cloud.

[25 : 26] It's going to be a terrible day. But yet he says, even now return to me with all your heart. Return your hearts and not your garments.

And these two things characterise the message of the prophets, a message of judgment and a message of salvation. That's a really good thing to remember whenever you read the Old Testament prophets.

But at the heart of that message was a promise that salvation was going to come in the future. And so although at one level, the Old Testament prophets spoke very powerfully into their own day, ultimately, they are looking forward to the day when God is going to provide salvation once and for all.

And on that day, the Old Covenant is going to be replaced with a new one. As Jeremiah 31 says, the days are coming to clear the Lord when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.

No longer will in each one say to his neighbour, know the Lord, for they shall all know me. I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sins no more. So Old Covenant, looking forward, all the time, looking forward, looking forward, waiting, waiting, waiting, waiting for this day.

[26 : 50] The great message of the New Testament prophets is that that day has come. And that's what Peter refers to in Acts chapter 2, which we read.

He stands up in front of the crowd and he says, do you know what's happening? Do you realize what is happening today? He's saying this is what the prophet Joel spoke about. This is what the Old Testament pointed towards in these last days.

I will pour out my spirit on all flesh. Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy. Your young men shall see visions. Your old men shall dream dreams.

And shall come to pass in verse 21 that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. So these events that we read about in Acts chapter 2 are interpreted by Peter and the other apostles as that moment where the new covenant era is inaugurated through the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ.

In other words, that promise of salvation that was coming has now arrived. That's why Peter quotes from Joel. That's why he talks about David. He is saying what the Old Testament was looking towards has now come.

[28 : 00] You'll see the same thing again and again in Acts when you see people like Peter, Stephen, Paul, Philip talking to people. They go straight back to the Old Testament and they say everything that this Old Testament was pointing towards has now come.

And in this new covenant era, the role of the prophets is to speak on God's behalf, to lay the foundations needed for the church, for the covenant people of God, for the gospel to spread and for the church to be built up.

And it's a brilliant message because first of all, it's a message of inclusion, not exclusion. So you go back to verse 17 and it's for everyone, sons, daughters, everyone.

It's included in this message. It's a message that's simple, not complicated. If you look at verse 21, it is so beautifully simple.

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. And it's a call for people to come back. Peter said, repent.

[29 : 06] That means come back and be baptized. Every one of you in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins. They've got this great prophetic message of the New Testament era.

It's a message of love, of peace, of hope, of joy, of forgiveness, of mercy, of healing, of security, of community. The New Testament prophets served to set this prophetic message down.

And where is it now? Who's got it? Where are you going to find it?

It's in your hands. It's in your hands. And I'll tell you, that's the prophecy we should be really excited about.

Because, you know, we can get very excited about predictions. If I stood up here and made predictions about what job you were going to have, or where you were going to live, or who was going to be the next Prime Minister, or when the next big bad weather event was going to be.

[30 : 09] If I made predictions about that and they all came through, everybody would be really excited. But, you know, the Bible has got something far, far, far more exciting for all of you.

Because the prophecy of the Old and New Covenants combine to tell us something amazing. They're combining to tell us that God's salvation has come.

It's not coming. It's come. And that's the greatest prophecy you will ever hear. That's what Peter told the people in Acts 2.

That's what the rest of the apostles told all the people that they came into contact with. That's what the Church of Jesus Christ has been telling to the world ever since. God's promise of salvation has arrived.

But I want you to notice something absolutely crucial that Peter says in the next verse. Oh, it's gone. Ah, where is it?

[31 : 07] Anyway, look at your Bible. It's in front of you. Oh, there it is. It's for you. He says the promise is for you.

And just think about that. What the Old Testament was looking towards, what the New Testament said down, it's for you.

And often we think, you know, our prophets are amazing, you know, and wouldn't it be amazing to be a prophet? You know, it's far better to be the person for whom this promise is for.

And that's what I think is just amazing about God. Is that he went from Moses to Elijah to Elisha to Isaiah to Jeremiah to Malachi to Paul to Barnabas to Silas to Phillips Daughters to all of these people.

For you. Because he wants to tell you that if you call on the name of the Lord, you will be saved.

[32 : 27] That's the most exciting prophecy the world has ever heard. And we've got a job now because there's a sense in which we all need to serve as God spokesmen and God's spokes, God's spokeswomen.

Because we've got this life-giving message and the world needs to hear it. So let's go for it. Let's pray.

God our Father, we thank you so much that you've not forgotten us.

That you've not abandoned us and that your promise of salvation has not failed. And we are so privileged to be able to know that that promise is for us.

We thank you for that great word of prophecy, that great message that you have sent, calling people back to you. And we just want to thank you with all our hearts for the way in which you have brought salvation to a broken world.

[33 : 37] And we pray that each and every one of us would look to you and trust in you and lean on you and take the opportunity to hear your voice and to hear your call.

And so that every single one of us would find the peace and the joy and the salvation that can only come in Jesus. Thank you for your word.

And we also pray for all those Lord who will perhaps view prophecy in a different way to us. And we know that there are people who would interpret things in a way that we wouldn't.

And we want to pray for them and pray that you would bless them. Not that we think that they need to be corrected, we are well aware that they might be right and we might be wrong. But we want to pray that you would bless their ministries and bless their work and encourage them and bind us all closer as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ.

We thank you Lord for the unity of your church. We pray that we would always maintain that beautiful unity in all that we do.

[34 : 43] In Jesus' name, Amen.