



# PROPHETS AND PROPHECY

“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,” [Ephesians 4:11-13](#)

In the last session, we looked at apostles as the first and most foundational ministry to the Church. In this session, we will continue by looking at prophets, the next ministry listed in [Ephesians 4](#). We will consider the invaluable role they, and the gift of prophecy, have in God’s great plan for His people.

## WHAT ARE PROPHETS?

“For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” [2 Peter 1:21](#)

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word translated “prophet” is *navi*. Its root meaning was “openness,” but generally it meant “spokesperson.” In [Deuteronomy 18:18](#), we have perhaps the fullest description of God’s intention for its use when He says to Moses, in reference to the coming of Christ, “I will raise up for them a prophet [*navi*] like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.” Thus, the *navi* was thought of as the “mouth” of God. In the New Testament, the Greek word *prophetes* carries the same sense, basically meaning one who makes declarations, but more particularly referring to those who interpreted and conveyed divine communications.

Prophets are individuals whom God specifically calls to communicate His heart and mind. They see through the natural, visible realm and into the spiritual and eternal. In a word, they are people of vision. In fact, in the Old Testament, prophets were sometimes referred to as *seers*.

## PROPHETS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Prophetic ministry is evident throughout the Old Testament, and played an essential role in God’s relationship with His people, individually and corporately. However, prophecy was not just for the people of Israel, and was often directed to Gentile nations and individuals.

God called prophets (male and female) from a variety of backgrounds. Some were highly educated, like Moses, Daniel, and Isaiah, and some were priests, such as Ezekiel and Jeremiah, while others came from a rural background, like Amos (a herdsman) and Elisha (a plowman). Abraham, called “the father of the faithful,” was the first person referred to as a prophet in Scripture ([Genesis 20:7](#)). In [Hebrews 11:10](#), we are told that “**he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.**” He began his journey with prophetic vision, and went on to receive promises from God of which we are both a fulfillment and the inheritors. Moses, the great shepherd of God’s people, was also tremendously significant as a prophet, “**testifying to what would be said in the future**” ([Hebrews 3:5 - NIV 1984](#)).

All of the judges who led Israel were prophetic, and some were specifically identified as prophets, including Deborah, Eli, and Samuel. With the establishing of Israel’s monarchy, the role of prophets did not diminish but in fact increased. As kings both good and bad came and went, it was the prophetic ministry of men like Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, and Elisha that primarily directed them when their leadership was righteous, and rebuked and judged them when it was not.

Whether plainly setting out the next step to be taken, as the minor prophets Joel and Haggai did, or prophetically painting a magnificent visionary landscape, as Isaiah and Jeremiah did, God consistently used prophets to reveal His unfolding purpose. Furthermore, we have wonderful and at times baffling glimpses of future events through the prophecies of men like Daniel and Ezekiel.

Prophets were frequently given glimpses into the wider intention of God for His people. Moses at one point spontaneously expressed God’s heart by saying, “**I wish that all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!**” ([Numbers 11:29 - NIV 1984](#)). This outpouring of the Holy Spirit would come through the ministry of Jesus.

## THE ULTIMATE PROPHET—JESUS CHRIST

“**Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power...**” [Hebrews 1:1-3](#)

The New Testament opens with John the Baptist, the prophetic preparer of the way for the ultimate prophet, Jesus—the Word made flesh and the exact imprint of His nature. However, far from closing the prophetic chapter, He came to usher in a whole new prophetic era. He went to be with the Father so that the Holy Spirit might be sent to equip God’s people prophetically. In [Acts 2](#), when Peter explains the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, he emphasizes that the consequent prophetic gifting is the fulfillment of the promise spoken through Joel:

“**And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.**” [Acts 2:17-18](#) (see also [Joel 2:28-32](#))

## PROPHETS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Though people tend to think of prophets in the context of the Old Testament, they were clearly prominent in the early Church. [Acts 13:1](#) tells us that there were prophets in the church in Antioch. In [Acts 15:32](#), Judas and Silas are identified as prophets, and in [Acts 11:26-28](#), Agabus (who appears again in [Acts 21:10-11](#)) is named as being among “prophets” who came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. In [Acts 21:9](#), we read that Philip had “four unmarried daughters, who prophesied.” Paul, in [1 Corinthians 12](#) and [Ephesians 3 and 4](#), affirms the existence of the office of prophet. In [1 Corinthians 11 and 14](#), he gives instructions as to how prophets are to function. Of course, in the book of Revelation, John shows himself to be a worthy New Testament successor to his prophetic forefathers Daniel and Ezekiel, with the visions he saw and conveyed.

## PROPHETS TODAY

While accepting the existence of prophets in New Testament times, some are reluctant to acknowledge modern day prophets. As we were reminded in the last session, the risen and ascended Christ gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers until the Church comes to unity, maturity, and the full measure of Christ ([Ephesians 4:11-14](#)). Since that process is still going on, prophets, along with all the other Ephesians 4 ministries, are still with us.

## PROPHETIC TRAITS

Consistent with the biblical pattern, it appears that God still calls prophets from a wide variety of backgrounds, life experiences, and personality types. However, there are certain things that many prophetically gifted people often seem to have in common, for example:

**PAST EXPERIENCE** — They have usually known extreme highs and lows, often resulting from unusual life events. Extraordinary trials, such as physical and emotional suffering, tragic loss, rejection, and disappointment, might have led to seasons of disillusionment, but also resulted in intimate and empowering encounters with God. He equips them through all of this to communicate to others the height and depth of His heart.

**PERCEPTION** — Of course, they see things differently to most people, not being as prone to distraction or influence by “natural” or “logical” thoughts. However, prophetic people can tend to think that what they perceive must be obvious to everyone, as it is so clear to them ([2 Kings 6:15-17](#)). At times, they see the big picture but are unable to know the practical outworking of it. Alternatively, sometimes they focus in on one issue without seeing how that fits in a broader context:

“For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away... For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.” [1 Corinthians 13:9-10, 12](#)

**PASSION** — Although prophets do not see everything, they tend to be very passionate about what they do see. They are driven to convey that which God has shown them, unashamedly bringing the same message again and again if necessary. In their uncompromising commitment, their very lives often become an embodiment of the things that God reveals to them.

Prophets do not always find it easy to relate to others, even in the Church. Their experiences, insight, and zeal set them apart. They can feel—and communicate—frustration when people do not see and respond to what they are seeing. Seemingly impractical and awkward to work with at times, many prophets have been misunderstood and poorly handled by the Church. They can, therefore, be tempted to choose a path of separation and isolation. However, this is not only a great loss to the Church, but a grave mistake for them. They desperately need to be in fellowship to receive the care and leadership they require for their development, and in order to persevere in the outworking of their gift.

## THE ROLE OF THE PROPHET

**“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,”** Ephesians 2:19-20

Here, Paul makes clear that prophets work alongside apostles as foundational ministries in the building of the Church. While not sharing the governmental role of apostles, prophets are pivotal in providing direction, strategic insight, and motivation to the local churches and the apostolic work. The voice of God spoken through the prophet is essential in shaping all that is built.

This, of course, requires that prophets are themselves joined to and working with apostles. Only in this context will they find the balance and perspective they need, and be able to outwork their gifting to the fullest and most fruitful extent. Prophets need more than mere tolerance, or even respect. They need the loving care, understanding, correction, and guidance that the other Ephesians 4 ministries can bring. In the context of such relationships, they will know great blessing and protection from many dangers.

As well as their foundational role, they also play a vital role in equipping the saints for the building up of the Body of Christ. It is perhaps significant that in Ephesians 4:11 (and indeed 1 Corinthians 12:28) prophets are listed next after apostles. When considering how God’s people are to be prepared **“for the work of ministry,”** we must remember that God desires a prophetic people who see and hear Him, are attuned to His thoughts and feelings, and who act accordingly. It is principally through the provoking, inspiring, and envisioning ministry of prophets that God produces such a people.

## RESPONDING TO PROPHETS

**“Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies,”** 1 Thessalonians 5:19-20

Even those who accept the concept of prophets and prophecy today can still fail to respond properly in practice. As already noted, prophets are not always the easiest people to relate to, and sometimes the words they bring—and even the way they bring them—can be challenging, confusing, and even upsetting. Also, prophets often experience rejection by those closest to them, on the principle that “familiarity breeds contempt.” Even Jesus encountered this problem, and said, **“A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household”** (Mark 6:4). We must not be dismissive of prophets, or the words they bring, simply because we have preconceptions regarding who they are and the extent to which we think God can use them:

**“The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward...”** Matthew 10:41

There is something very specific that we receive when we recognize and accept a gift ministry according to the call of God upon their lives. In the case of the prophet, we receive **“a prophet’s reward,”** which we might reasonably assume to be the word of God, as that is what the prophet longs for and receives.

## BECOMING PROPHETIC

“Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, **especially the gift of prophecy**... everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their **strengthening, encouragement and comfort**... he who prophesies edifies the church. I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified.”  
1 Corinthians 14:1, 3, 4b-5 (NIV 1984)

Having briefly considered prophets themselves, and understanding that part of their ministry is to equip the entire Church to develop as prophetic people, we will now take a closer look at the gift of prophecy itself and how we can all grow in it.

**EAGERLY DESIRE** — First, we must recognize that, although not all of us are called to be prophets, we are all instructed to “**eagerly desire spiritual gifts...especially prophecy**.” For the church-wide instruction in [1 Corinthians 14 \(NIV 1984\)](#) to make any sense, we must all be capable of prophesying. And when we truly understand that prophecy is one of the major means God has provided for us to be strengthened, encouraged, and comforted, why would we not want this?

**HUMBLY ASK** — We should simply begin to ask God to open our eyes and ears prophetically, and to speak to us. The profound comment in [James 4:2](#), “**you do not have, because you do not ask**,” could pertain to many things, but would certainly apply here.

**EXPECTANTLY WAIT** — After having asked God, believing that He hears us, we must take time to listen and watch for what He *will* reveal to us. This is faith!

**SOBERLY DISCERN** — Prophetic sensitivity can develop gradually, and the voice of God can come in quite non-dynamic ways—we don’t need to have an “out of body” experience! In fact, it is not always immediately distinguishable from natural senses. This was the case for the boy Samuel ([1 Samuel 3](#)), later to become a great prophet. However, we should bear in mind that not everything that God enables us to see is to be shared. We should ask Him to confirm whether we are to share it, and if so, when and how. At times, we may receive things purely so we can pray with insight for people or situations. At other times, our responsibility may end by sharing what we have with leaders, or others who can help weigh and judge the rightness of a word.

**FAITHFULLY GIVE** — If we know we are to prophesy, we should “bring the word, the whole word, and nothing but the word.” Some are inclined to be brief if they are uncomfortable with public speaking. Others may be tempted to embellish or extend what they have in order to make it “clearer” or more impressive. Realistically, we are unlikely to be mistaken for Isaiah when we first start prophesying! God might give a single word or simple impression, but we must determine to share what we have. We must not despise “**the day of small beginnings**” ([Zechariah 4:10 - CEV](#)). As when God spoke to Jonah about Nineveh, we may not even like what we are told to bring. Whatever the case, we must remember that we are acting as God’s “spokesperson” and must let the fear of God determine what we do, no matter what the result!

As we grow in this area, we must avoid becoming discouraged along the way. People beginning to develop in prophetic sensitivity can sometimes despair when, having sensed something that they felt was from God but having hesitated through uncertainty, someone else goes ahead and brings the same thing! In situations like this, rather than feeling frustrated or condemned, we should be encouraged that we are indeed hearing from God, and that He had the situation covered. Next time though, rather than assuming that what we have is just our own thought, let’s accept that it may well be His thought, and at least share it with a leader who can help us to discern it.

## PRACTICALITIES IN PROPHECY

Some view prophecy in an overly-mystical way, and might be surprised at the very practical approach taken so far in this session. They might view “the spirit of prophecy” as just something that comes upon us unpredictably, and over which we have no personal responsibility or even control. However, Scripture gives us many practical guidelines and helpful instructions regarding prophecy, for example the following:

“Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said... For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. For God is not a God of disorder but of peace.” 1 Corinthians 14:29, 31-33a (NIV 1984)

God intends that both His order and His care be expressed in how prophetic ministry operates. As God has given us this measure of control in how we are to function prophetically, we need not fear asking God not just *what* to say but *how* we should say it so as to properly communicate His heart.

We do not need to start every prophecy with “the Lord says,” nor always prophesy in the first person. This is not to say these practices are wrong, but “styles” of prophecy (even prophesying in “King James English”) do not make the word any more or less authentic.

The prophets we find in the Bible are an extraordinary array of demonstrative personalities, and should leave us in little doubt that God intends that prophecy should communicate His heart with conviction and passion. Therefore, we should faithfully give ourselves to expressing His word in whatever way He leads us.

With this in mind, we should be open regarding whether the word we have might be better brought in a form other than regular speech, for example, with some type of visual presentation (see Agabus in Acts 21:11), or perhaps as a song. In weighing this, however, it is helpful to remember that God did choose you to bring this word, and without being closed to an exception, if, for example, you happen to have an awful singing voice, this could potentially detract from rather than add to the impact of the word. Obviously, the same could be said of dance, mime, or any other artistic expression.

## PERSONAL PROPHECY

As we draw to the conclusion of this session, we would encourage particular caution regarding directional words for individuals, and recommend the following guidelines:

### BRINGING PERSONAL WORDS

1. Bear in mind the purpose of prophecy:

“...everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort.”  
1 Corinthians 14:3 (NIV 1984)

Although words God gives us for others may not always sound positive, we should at least be sure that, if received properly, the word will ultimately result in strengthening, encouragement, and comfort.

2. Remember that when you prophesy, you are being God’s spokesman, conveying what God thinks and feels. Be careful that you are not being unduly influenced by natural factors, for example the things that you think about the person or would really want for them, or even your frustrations with them!
3. Consider carefully what we said earlier regarding whether the word you have received should be shared or is simply for you to pray with insight.

4. Do not be quick to act the first time you receive a word, vision, or dream that may have a great impact on someone's life. Scripture shows us time and time again God's willingness to repeat and confirm words of great significance to us, often multiple times (for example, with Samuel's call, Joseph's dreams, Gideon's confirmation, and Peter's rooftop vision).
5. In most cases, we would recommend submitting directional personal prophecies to the leaders of the church prior to bringing them directly to people. Quite apart from their ability to help you weigh the word, leaders have care and responsibility for the person and will no doubt be involved with them as they seek to respond rightly to the word. Leaders are often able to guide us with the right timing, which can be critical in bringing words. **Proverbs 25:11** says, "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver."
6. Seek God for a word of wisdom regarding how it might be delivered (see Nathan with David, **2 Samuel 12**). Prophecy can function in conjunction with other gifts, such as words of knowledge and words of wisdom, which can help in the delivery and receiving of the words.

## RECEIVING PERSONAL WORDS

**"Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good." 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21**

Many believers have been inspired, guided and enriched by prophetic words spoken over them. However, this has not always been the case. Some have received erroneous words, sometimes from false prophets, but often just from well-meaning but mistaken brothers and sisters. No matter who brings a prophecy to us, we should neither dismiss it nor fully accept it as the word of the Lord until it has been properly weighed. Here are a few general principles for testing a word before accepting it:

1. Does it line up with biblical truth? No prophetic word from God will contradict or cast doubt on the written Word of God. In assessing this, you might want to seek the counsel of those with strong scriptural knowledge:
 

**"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness," 2 Timothy 3:16**
2. If you are unsure regarding the meaning of a prophetic word, ask whoever brought it to clarify exactly what they heard or saw. They may also tell you what they think the word means, though caution should be exercised here. Those bringing words can easily put their own interpretations on words they bring.
3. Ask God for independent confirmation from other sources, including others who are prophetically sensitive and, of course, those who carry governmental leadership in your life. Interestingly, those who have received multiple prophecies from various people often notice significant similarities and repeated themes. This is because people with prophetic vision who pray over us will often see the same key words and callings that God has placed over our lives.
4. Do not worry about words that you can do little about. Trust God and see if they come to pass. If they do not produce faith and peace in you, be free to reject them. Sometimes words declare that something will happen in a certain timeframe. If this does not happen, you can probably throw them out completely as false! It will do you no good to hang on to them after their "sell by date."

**"FOR THE LORD GOD DOES NOTHING WITHOUT REVEALING HIS SECRET TO HIS SERVANTS THE PROPHETS."**

Amos 3:7



If opportunity allows, give honest feedback to those who prophesy over you. This can be very helpful in encouraging and correcting those learning to grow prophetically.

## GROWING AS A PROPHETIC PEOPLE

The prophetic word is incredibly powerful, both in the lives of individuals and the Church corporately. We are grateful to God that He has given us much instruction in Scripture regarding how we are to function with this gift. The leaders of this family of churches are committed to creating an environment where every member of the body grows in prophetic gifting.

Consider the following remarkable statement:

**“For the Lord God does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets.”** [Amos 3:7](#)

This being the case, rather than dismissing or minimizing the role of the prophet, we should be praying, “Lord, raise up a host of prophets to help us become an increasingly prophetic people.”

Arthur Wallis, a recognized prophetic teacher and author, is quoted as saying, *“It is my conviction that recognizing apostles and prophets, and letting them function, will yet prove the most important restoration breakthrough of our time.”*

## RECOMMENDED READING

1. *Developing Your Prophetic Gifting* by Graham Cooke
2. *Prophetic Ministry* by T. Austin-Sparks