

## HOW TO BE A PROPHET, PART 3

### Romans 12:6

**Dr. George O. Wood**

Today, again, we're in Romans 12:6. This is the longest, in my years as pastor of this church, that I have been in one verse. It's been a great experience for me to just savor these moments of hearing the Word in a very direct and pinpointed way.

“We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith” (Romans 12:6, NIV).

The gift of prophecy is the first of seven motivational gifts that Paul speaks of here in this section of verses 6–8, whereby the church is meant to be built up. Three of the motivational gifts involve speech: prophecy, exhortation, and speaking. Four of the motivational gifts, which bring strength and upbuilding to the body, have to do with activity or service. Prophecy is first off the list. We have thus far attempted in the previous two Sundays to look at what a prophet is. We have suggested that a prophet is one who sees. And a prophet is also one who speaks for God. Most fundamentally, a prophet, as a speaker for God, forth tells. And as one who sees, frequently the prophet foretells.

What does a prophet do? According to 1 Corinthians 14:3, a prophet, when he speaks—or the gift of prophecy, when it is exercised—builds the body up, builds people up. It brings encouragement. It brings consolation. And to the unbeliever who is listening to the prophecy, it can also bring conviction and conversion.

Today, we want to look at two other features of prophecy. First, how does prophecy function?

And secondly, in what forms do prophecy come?

#### **I. How does prophecy function?**

Basically, in the New Testament there are three ways in which prophecy functions. First, there is the office of prophet. Secondly, there is the gift of prophecy. And thirdly, there is a sense in

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which all of us are invited to participate in prophecy because the Spirit is to be placed upon all flesh—sons and daughters, handmaids, and maidservants.

**A.** The office of prophet. In our parlance today, it practically—at least in the local church—is a nonexistent sort of a term. I got to looking at my stationery from the church and saw that my name was on it as “pastor,” and Wayne as “assistant pastor.” We didn’t have any other names attached to it. But if we would go on and put the other staff positions on it, when we got all done listing the staff positions, deacons and the like, we don’t have anyone anywhere on the church stationery as “prophet.” I began to wonder. Should we take staff roles and reclassify? Two things occurred to me. First of all, often the function of prophet is occurring, and yet the name, the nomenclature, isn’t being used. Secondly, God has had me spend these three weeks on this emphasis because He really wants to raise up prophetic people. He wants to lay it upon persons’ heart within this audience to become a prophet or prophetess. To be known as that. And also to incite others to experience the gift of prophecy within Christian community. I’ve seen in my life, many times, the office of prophet functioning without that name being applied.

In the New Testament, we find persons identified as prophets. Having the office of prophet. For example, Agabus, who is noted twice in the text of Acts and called both times, in chapters 11 and 21, a prophet. In Acts 13, at Antioch we find that the five people on the pastoral staff are called prophets and teachers. In Acts 15, Judas and Silas, who are sent by the Jerusalem church down to Antioch, are called prophets. And the four daughters of Philip are called prophetesses. In the description of church offices in Ephesians 4:11, we find that there are apostles and then prophets. And the same categorization holds in 1 Corinthians 12:28—apostles, prophets.

Apostles are the ones, if you will, who lay the foundation for the Church or lay the course that the Church is to be set upon. They are the church planters. The prophets come along to make sure that the doctrine and the footing that has been given for the Church by the apostles is

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maintained, and the Church, the body of Christ and individuals in it, keep on the course that has been set. They are, if you will, the program correctors.

The Lord wants to awaken within us as a congregation this emphasis upon prophecy, to recognize that the office of prophet is not something just related to New Testament times. There are some who would have us believe that—that all the charismatic gifts ceased in the New Testament age.

One observation really struck me for the need for prophecy and the tremendous strength that prophecy can have within the situation today. Now that the canon of Scripture is complete in the Old and New Testament, the prophet who speaks now in the body of Christ has more of God's written revelation to draw upon than, let's say, the prophets within the New Testament Church, who did not have the totality of the New Testament text yet completed to draw upon. If you watch prophecy as it functions, continually the prophets speak from a fundamental knowledge of what God has already revealed in a written way. The prophets of Israel, for example, were continually going back to the law of Moses and what revelation God gave to Moses as a reinforcement for their prophecy. The more written revelation there is, the more exhortative the prophet can be. And in the New Testament sense, in the Church, the office of prophet now is not giving new doctrine or new insight, but taking what God has revealed. And since there is so much of it that God has revealed, the prophet seizes a hold of it and—through prayer, and through the speaking of the Holy Spirit, and through the meeting of the human need—comes in a precise moment of time with a word from God.

The Book of Hebrews, I think, sets an excellent example for what may be—even within the New Testament—a prophetic sort of message. For the writer of Hebrews takes continually Old Testament text, and he weds it with the situation that there were Jewish believers who are being persecuted and who were beginning to wonder, "Did we make a mistake? Should we go back to

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Judaism?” So the writer of Hebrews, working with the text of the Old Testament, says things like: “But now we have a better priesthood. We have a better sanctuary. We have a better altar. We have a better sacrifice. And remember the heroes of faith, and remember that suffering is the part of the people of God, and remember about those who turn back. And time after time, as you read the Book of Hebrews, you have this tremendous sense of building and encouragement and consolation that is being given, which is really the motifs of prophecy.

We need the purposes for prophecy fulfilled—the awakening that makes this book which comes to us more than simply words on a page, but a living instrument. As Hebrews itself says, “The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, cutting swift and deep into our innermost thoughts and desires with all their parts, exposing us for what we really are” (Hebrews 5:12).

He knows about everyone, everywhere. Everything about us is bare and wide open to the all-seeing eyes of our living God. Nothing can be hidden from Him, to whom we must explain all that we have done.

When we look at the office of prophet, it’s very easy from the New Testament to pick out what are the qualities that go with this office. If God is calling you to be a prophet or if He’s calling you to recognize prophets, here’s what is involved.

- 1.** First of all, a strong and consistent Christian life. There must be walk before talk. And the strong and consistent Christian life means that when you look at the life of the prophet, you see the fruit of the Spirit being manifest continually. Prophecy has great impact. Prophecy comes, really, if you will, as an explosion from the heart of God, exploding into our hearts. And this explosion—this ignition which the prophet takes his torch to—this comes because the prophet, in his own life, is walking closely with the Lord and is in tune with Him. In fact, the prophet is so in tune with the Lord that on some occasions in the Scripture, the prophet is even described as

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being set apart for his task from his mother's womb. But we look for a strong and consistent Christian life in those that exercise prophetic ministry.

2. The second thing which we would expect in the office of prophet is a powerful knowledge of Scripture. Since the prophet is not closed up in a mystical room somewhere—meditating by candlelight, wondering what word he's going to speak next—but is rather a person who's so powerfully in tune with God and, therefore, in tune with the written Scripture, we would expect that the message of the prophet continually be fed by the streams of Scripture. And that the prophet not only understand the words of Scripture, but understand the principles of Scripture as well.

3. The office of prophet also will be marked by an ongoing and continual exercise of prophecy. This is almost taken for granted. It almost doesn't bear mentioning. But the fact that the people in the New Testament era could be called prophets means that they were continually exercising that role. And they exercised it so much that, after a while, people could not think of them in any other role. The term that fit them best was the term "prophet."

4. Another characteristic of a prophet is that a prophet often functions at key or crisis moments. That is where prophecy is so extremely critical. There are those junctures to which the people of God come when they are assembled. Or to which persons themselves come, where God wants to speak into that situation a spontaneous word from His heart. I think, for example, of the laying on of hands when Timothy is ordained into the ministry and is set part for his association with Paul. Paul notes in writing to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:14 that there was a gift that was bestowed them through the laying on of hands. He urges Timothy to stir up that gift which is in him. Evidently, at the time when hands were laid up on Timothy, some of the elders, along with Paul, spoke a powerful word to Timothy which suggests what course his ministry would take. An

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importation of a spiritual grace. We saw through examples that Ron mentioned this morning how consistently, in key and crisis moments, the prophets were present.

5. Another element, I think, that goes with the office of prophet is fruitfulness and the gift. That is, when the prophet prophesies, the word of God has a powerful effect. It is not some ho-hum word. It stirs because the prophet speaks from the power of his life and, therefore, also the power of words.

6. One other thing which I would add to the office of prophet—and I can't quote a proof text for this—but I would suggest that one way, certainly, to separate those from the office of prophet that shouldn't be there would be to use this additional criteria. That is, require that the prophet be related to a local church base. This is an age of electrical evangelism, media evangelism, itinerate teachers, book writers, and the like. One of the things which can so easily come when you get into that arena of ministry is to begin to neglect association with a local body of people so that there is not a plugged-inness to what God is doing on a local level. The heretics that I watch today in the teaching and prophetic realm of the Church, by and large, are those who do not have a tied-in rooted association with a body of people. I think there are scriptural principles to warrant that addition, but I'll let you find them.

**B.** The second way prophecy functions in the New Testament church is through the gift of prophecy. There are several things we need to note that Scripture teaches about the gift of prophecy, when we gather together as Christian congregations.

1. First of all, the gift of prophecy is distributed or apportioned as the Spirit wills. Even though all are to desire this gift, yet it is the Spirit who speaks. It is the Spirit who, according to Romans 12:3, assigns—so, according to 1 Corinthians 12, apportions. And when the Spirit, therefore, apportions this gift, one who has the gift upon him can only say with Amos: “The Lord God has spoken. Who can but prophesy?” So the Lord apportions.

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2. Secondly, the gift of prophecy, then, is exercised by faith. It's not all automatic. The Lord doesn't say, "I have chosen to use you for the gift of prophecy, so would you please put your mind in neutral and let Me engage your tongue so that I will now pull the strings and you'll be My robot?" No. For Paul specifically says that he that prophecies must prophesy in accordance with his faith. It is impossible to receive prophecy, the gift of prophecy, unless you believe that God can speak to you, that the Holy Spirit can impress you with things. And it is also, in exercising the gift of prophecy, a recognition that it's not your own word which you're speaking, but it is truly God's word for this moment. Faith to believe that God is the God who speaks, and that God is using you for this moment.

I was listening to ABC's "Good Morning America," and a comment was made by one of the columnists that Ann Landers was quoted as having said that she would rather trust a homosexual to babysit her children than Anita Bryant, because Anita Bryant ran around claiming that God spoke to her. And Ann Landers didn't trust people who claimed God spoke to them.

I think that comment is so perceptive in showing the natural man attitude toward this statement, "God spoke to me." When we use that phrase, it has to be ringed by all sorts of legitimate boundaries which Scripture itself sets. So we don't accept every word in which a person says, "God spoke to me." But at the same time, if the gift of prophecy is to function, it functions out of the sense that, "God has spoken to me, and what can I do but prophesy?"

3. The third thing that controls the gift of prophecy, not only that God apportions and it's exercised by faith—the third thing that controls it is order. Order prevails. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14 that the spirit of the prophet is subject to the prophet. He also tells the prophets to take turns, not to all be speaking at one time. I believe this idea of the prophet's spirit being subject to the prophet means, also, that they're gracious. They do not interrupt someone else in the middle of what that person is talking about. They don't scream, fall on the floor, foam at the

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mouth, or do any kinds of these things—unless they’re doing it as prophetic symbol, maybe, once in a while. So order prevails. There’s a naturalness to it, even though the supernatural is invading that moment.

4. A fourth thing about the gift of prophecy, when it’s expressed, is that it must meet certain tests. There are fundamentally two tests which are applied to it. The first test is concerned with false prophets. In fact, the New Testament, as well as the Old Testament, is more fundamentally concerned with false prophets than false prophecy. The assumption being that the true prophet will give the right message. It is the false prophet who will inevitably come forth with false prophecies. There are warnings in Scripture that are given to us on this.

The gift of prophecy was rather frequently practiced in the New Testament experience. John writes, for example, the minimum requirement on testing the prophets. “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God” (1 John 4:1-3, NIV). Elemental test: glorification of Jesus Christ, and recognition of who He is.

Jesus says in Matthew 7:21–23 that there would come to Him—asking entrance into the eternal Kingdom—those who said, “We prophesied in Your name; we cast out demons in Your name; and we did mighty works in Your name,” as their rationale for being admitted into the age to come. Jesus will say to them, “Depart from me. I never knew you.” The setting of that, Matthew 7, is it comes at the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus has been talking about the lifestyle He wants in His people. He is distinguishing, therefore, the false prophet from the true prophet by saying the true prophet is going to be one who, while embodying Christ’s lifestyle, will understand the gospel not as something you do, but—first of all—what you are in

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Him. The false prophet will come along and measure the effectiveness of what he's done by simply that—what he has done—mighty works, casting out demons, and prophesying. But Jesus says, “He hasn't lived by what I have given for him to live.” Jesus also says in Matthew 24:24 that false prophets and false Christ will arise and show great signs and wonders so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.

Deuteronomy 13:1–3 also picks up on this theme of false prophets by saying: “If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place [which is one of the tests for prophecy], and he says, ‘Let us follow other gods’ (gods you have not known) ‘and let us worship them,’ you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. The LORD your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul” (NIV).

So given the fact that the Old and the New Testament places a stress upon the prophets themselves, it is expected that when we see this gift being exercised we do the same thing. That is why I asked that those who were prophesying within this congregation be known to me and have their family life in order. Two simple little tests which separate an awful lot of people right away who are not qualified to speak a word on behalf of God within the structure of Christian community being gathered.

There's a second prophetic test, however. Not a test for prophets, but a test for prophecies. We look for this in prophecy, the gift of prophecy, when it is expressed. Is it true to the Scripture? Of course, that's fundamental. And if it is true to the Scripture, obviously it will lead us into Jesus because we are saying, “Beyond the sacred page, we seek Thee, Lord.”

Does prophecy evidence faith and love and hope? We could spend much time on each one of those words. But faith is needed to be exercised in the prophecy if a prophet is to speak at all. Love is needed to be emphasized because the prophet is speaking from the heart of God.

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Sometimes love comes in a corrective form. I love my children when I discipline them. We know that also, from the Book of Hebrews, God loves us when He disciplines us. But the fundamental motivation of love must govern and control. It's not setting somebody straight. Prophecy always offers a word of hope. It may come with judgmental impact, but out of it we see the alternatives which God offers if we turn to Him.

There's also this thing I believe about prophecy, and I've seen this in spiritual gifts demonstrated in the congregation—whether it's the gift of tongues with interpretation or the gift of prophecy. That is, gifts—when they're expressed—have what I would call the spiritual resonance. The Body, as a whole, feels agreement or disagreement with what is given. Resonance technically is this: Objects have certain characteristic frequencies at which they vibrate. So if you cause one object—for example, a bell—to vibrate near another object with the same frequency, that is, another bell of the same shape and size, the second object will begin to vibrate by itself as a result of the vibrancy of the first object. There is this kind of resonance within a spiritual meeting when the gifts are being expressed that our hearts are tingling just as the prophets' are tingling. If that resonance isn't going on, then it was perhaps a weak prophecy, an impure prophecy, a prophecy that needs correction, or a prophet that needs to be told not to prophesy. Sometimes even spiritual discernment is needed when there is resonance to make sure that what is happening is of the Spirit of God.

Another test for prophecy, especially when it's predictive, is this: Did the prophecy come to pass? If, for example, a predictive prophecy is made, that prophet is speaking on behalf of God. And God's word cannot fail. Therefore, if what is predicted has not come to pass, it could not be that God spoke because God's words do not fail. God's words never fail in coming to pass

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Deuteronomy 18:22 covers this eventuality and says this: “When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is the word which the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You shall not be afraid of him.”

There’s a difference between Deuteronomy 13, the false prophet, and Deuteronomy 18, the false prophecy. The false prophet is one whose words may even come true, but he’s leading you away from God. The false prophecy, however, is a word that simply did not come to pass, and the person is automatically branded as a nonbeliever. He’s not even given the sentence of Deuteronomy 13, which was capital punishment. It is simply spoken presumptuously, and he’s not to be listened to. You should not be afraid of him. So when we hear a predictive prophecy, the sure test for it is: Did it come to pass? If it doesn’t come to pass, it is not necessarily an indication that a person is a false prophet. It may just mean that a person has spoken presumptuously.

One of the things I think is the most heart-rending situations that I have been in personally was when a close friend of ours from college days passed away about 34 years ago—a young, vivacious wife and mother a couple years younger than I. She had had a disease which was very serious, fatal. There had been a prophecy given to her by one of the local prophets in the area that she would be healed. It was very unmistakably clear by what was meant by the healing that it was meant to be a physical healing. When the funeral occurred, however, the pastor who had the funeral was trying now to get the prophet out of a jam that he had gotten into instead of simply saying at this point, “The prophet missed and spoke presumptuously. He’s a good brother in the Lord and all that.” Perhaps counseling him on the side to really be more careful about predictive prophesying would have been helpful. But instead, the pastor made a comment, “The prophecy came true. She is well. She’s with the Lord.” In an ultimate sense, we know that’s true—that the prophecy, in an eternal sense, came to pass. But that happened not to be what the

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prophet meant when he spoke it, and nobody had that peculiar interpretation of the prophecy until this friend of mine passed away.

Therefore, we need to be exceedingly cautious in this when a predictive prophecy is made. I join faith and say, “Praise God! May it be so.” If it does not come to pass, then we reevaluate where we’re at and recognize presumption.

We want the gift of prophecy to develop in our congregation. We’re told in this Scripture not to despise the day of small things. I know of no ministry which has ever just suddenly appeared on the scene—like somebody snapped their finger and, “Bang!” there it was. The first time I ever preached, it was a terrible experience. I shook, trembled, turned red, blue, and purple and everything else!

The first time a person exercises the gift of prophecy, I don’t believe it’s going to come with the same power and vibrancy that it will twenty-five or thirty years down the road as they continue to exercise the gift. There is growth and development. So we need not despise the day of small things.

In fact, evidently some of the Early Church people did despise the day of small things, because Paul had to write the Thessalonians and correct them and say, “Do not despise prophesying” (1 Thessalonians 5:20). It’s very easy to despise it sometimes when people are beginning. But instead Paul says, “Test everything. Hold what is good” (verse 21).

If you want to become a prophet, therefore, saturate yourself in the Word of God and prayer. Be obedient to the Spirit when He’s speaking to you and saying, “Share this word.” I would also encourage beginning prophets not to be predictive in the beginning, since I think that is one of the most difficult phases of prophecy. But, rather, stay with the three dimensions of prophecy which Paul noted in 1 Corinthians 14:3: to build up, to encourage, and to console. And also, the congregation ought to have the grace to recognize that if a mistake is made in a gift of prophecy

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that we are mature enough in the Lord to allow a person to fail and to start over again. I think that's fundamental to Christian ministry. Sometimes we have such a syndrome of perfection that if it isn't always done exactly right, then cut it out. We all need room for growth.

One additional thing I want to look at with you. Not only, "How does prophecy function?"

We've looked at the gift of prophecy and prophets.

### **II. But the forms that prophecy comes in.**

We'll run over these quickly—several in the New Testament.

**A.** One form of prophecy might be called the oracle. That is where a person says, "Thus says the Lord." It's a word from God. The word "oracle" itself occurs some four times in the New Testament to describe the Ten Commandments, to describe the written revelation of the Old Testament, to describe, also, the Christian doctrine. And in 1 Peter 4:11, Peter says, "Whoever speaks, as one who utters oracles of God." So that when a person addresses a Christian congregation—whether it be teaching, preaching, prophecy, or exhortation—the person who is speaking is, according to Peter, to treat their words as carefully as though they themselves were inspired Scripture. That's not saying they are inspired Scripture, but to be exceedingly careful with words so that God is accurately represented and reflected. An oracle of God. "Thus says the Lord."

**B.** Another form in which prophecy comes is prophetic exhortation—simply encouragement.

Acts 15:32: "Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, exhorted the brethren with many words and strengthened them." Hebrews is an excellent example of prophetic exhortation, written, probably, not by an apostle—maybe somebody like Barnabas—and giving a powerful incentive to Christians to go on living for the Lord in a very perilous moment.

**C.** Prophecy can also come in the form of inspired prayer. An example of this is Luke 1, where Zechariah, his tongue is let loose when he finally writes, "His name shall be John." And the

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Scripture says, his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people.” He, all of a sudden, as he began to prophesy in prayer, the future of his son began to be revealed to him. And also the glory of the Lord in Jesus the Messiah was revealed. I must confess, I’m very conscious of this when I dedicate babies. I’m praying that it will be if possible that the Lord, at that moment, would put upon me a spirit of prophecy, a prophetic utterance for that situation and that child. It’s ok to come to the Lord in inspired, prophetic prayer, speaking powerfully to Him.

**D.** There is also a manner of prophecy which we might call revelation, or personal prophecy. I became aware of personal prophecy as a teenager when I heard of a situation in another church where a young man’s mother had gone to a young lady and said, “The Lord revealed to me that you’re to marry my son.” How do we handle personal prophecy? Personal prophecy, especially if it has to do with revealing someone’s sin, should be, with rare exception, given personally and privately.

When Jesus speaks to the woman at the well and says, “I perceive that you’ve had five husbands and the one you’re living with now is not your husband,” she says, “Sir, I recognize you’re a prophet” (John 4). Notice Jesus spoke that to her in the loneliness of their encounter, one to one. He did not go in the middle of the town and say, “Woman, you’ve had five husbands. The man you’re living with now is not your husband.” To expose her in a public situation gives no room for the kind of redemptive healing that God wanted to accomplish.

Or Nathan, when he confronts David for his sin with Bathsheba and Uriah, he does not approach him in public. But he comes in a lonely moment and says, “You are the man” (2 Samuel 12).

The only occasion I know of in Scripture where a personal sin of a private nature like this is confronted publicly was Ananias and Sapphira, and I tried to do a little theologizing as to why it was not handled privately. It appears to me in their situation that the day of grace was already

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past, and judgment was imposed. But I would take that to be a rare circumstance, rather than a common manifestation of prophecy, if it's revealing private sin.

I used to have this feeling, before I studied psychology, that I was nervous about being around psychologists because I thought, "They know everything about me. They can read your mind." I realize now that they really can't. But prophets can kind of give you this feeling, too. "I don't dare show up because someone's going to call me out and expose me and humiliate me publicly. I know what's going on in my life." If something is going on in your life and you're aware of it, the word of God is already exposing it and bringing it to light in your life. It's only a sheer act of grace that God will, in addition to His Word, send you a prophet with a revelation. But He will send that prophet, most likely, in a lonely moment.

There is also such a thing as keeping a personal prophecy to yourself and not letting it out.

Jeremiah did this in Jeremiah 32:6–9 where the Lord speaks to him to buy a field from a man by the name of Hanamel. Finally, he comes and says, "I want you to buy my field." Then Jeremiah says, "Then I knew it was the word of the LORD." In other words, up to that time he wasn't at all sure whether it was the word of the Lord or not. And he didn't go to Hanamel and say, "You should sell me your field." But he waited until he came.

So I'd encourage you, if God is speaking to you about someone else, that maybe you ought to wait until they come. And then say, "It really was the word of the Lord."

Personal prophecy may also be used, at times, to confirm a calling. This evidently happened with Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:14, and 2 Timothy as well, where the gift that was in him—evidently the gift of speaking, the gift of teaching, and preaching, and exhortation—was actuated and laid upon him through prophetic utterance when he was ordained. Hands were laid upon him.

Probably the will and the desire to be that was already upon him, but prophecy brought it forth.

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Personal prophecy also may reveal information. But I never see it in Scripture as functioning so as to give guidance. I would turn to Acts 21 as illustration of this. Agabus comes to Paul and says, as he takes his sash off his robe and ties it around Paul, “So shall the Jews in Jerusalem bind the man who owns this girdle and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.” Notice that Agabus says what’s going to happen, but he did not go on to say to Paul, “Don’t go!” He didn’t give him guidance. Whereas, there were some prophets at another place, if you look in Acts 21:4, before Agabus came. “Finding the disciples there, we stayed with them seven days. Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.” Through the Spirit, they told Paul not to go to Jerusalem? What’s this? How can the Spirit tell him not to go? This phrase, “Through the Spirit they told Paul not to go to Jerusalem,” evidently means that while they were prophesying, they go on past the Spirit. But feeling they’re in the Spirit, they say, “Don’t go.” But Agabus, who is the more mature prophet, simply says, “You’re going to be bound if you go.” But he doesn’t offer him advice. Because when personal prophecy is given to you, God has made you the final decider of what you’re going to do, and not the person bringing you the prophecy. If somebody comes to you and says, “God has shown me that you’re to do this and this,” you can very firmly, on Scripture, say, “That may be well and good that I received that. But God has committed to me the judgment on finally deciding what I’m going to be doing, and I’ll be responsible before God for that.” In Paul’s case, Agabus’s prophecy serves to be a real encouragement to him later when he got into trouble.

**E.** Another form in which prophecy can come is through visions. Sometimes prophecy can come through prophetic actions. Jeremiah makes yoke bars and says, “People are going to go into slavery like oxen.” Jeremiah buys a field as prophetic action and says, “Jerusalem is eventually going to be reinhabited.” Isaiah goes naked and barefoot as prophetic action to show that Assyria is going to capture the Ethiopians and Egyptians, and they’re going to be led away naked and

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barefoot. Hosea and Isaiah give their children prophetic names. “Not my people” is one of Hosea’s children’s names. Ezekiel builds a model of Jerusalem under siege as a prophetic action. Agabus takes a girdle. Often, the prophet can symbolize through action what God is saying. To bring all this to a moment of conclusion, I want to repeat again what Moses said in the Book of Numbers. “Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit upon them” (11:29). A word also from Acts 2:17-18: “In the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh. And your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men dream dreams. Yes, and on my menservants and on my maidservants in those days, I will pour out my Spirit and they shall prophesy.”

God makes us actually aware of His presence that we might be incited to desire the gift of prophesying, that we might use it well. And we sense in the Scripture that teaching controls prophecy, as the apostle teaches the prophets. We have used these three Sundays to give teaching on prophecy that it might emerge and be all that God wants it to be within our congregation.

### **Closing Prayer**

Our Father, as we come to You In this moment, we would still our hearts to acknowledge Your presence. You are the God who speaks. And we are the people who hear. Lord, I think of that moment when the Apostle Paul came over the hill into the Valley of Ephesus. So vividly do I picture that in my mind because of standing there just a few months ago. As he comes up over that hill and sees the city laid out before him and the ocean coming in to a beautiful harbor, he finds there a city of 300,000 people. And twenty-five years after You were resurrected, there’s no body of believers there—even though Christians had come and gone in the place. In that place, finally, he finds twelve people who are loyal to a denomination, but hadn’t gone past John the Baptist into You. So he meets with them. His question to them was, “Did you receive the

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Holy Spirit when you believed?” He recognized—as he looked at that town and then looked at only twelve people being there—that something was missing. There was no power in the midst. And there had to be a reason why there was no power. It must be because the Holy Spirit had not yet been bestowed. He discovers, in answer to the question, that not only had the Holy Spirit not been received, but that the people themselves had not believed on Jesus. So they believed and were baptized, and Paul laid his hands upon them to receive the Spirit. They received the Spirit, and they all spoke in tongues and prophesied. Lord, before the gift of prophecy, before being a prophet, You want us to follow You and know who You are—to be baptized in Your name and to have, also, the gift of the Spirit, evidenced by power in communicating with You through other tongues. And power, then, to communicate to others in our world through prophecy. I pray for this church, that we’ll really feel Your heart on this matter and fulfill—perform—what are the rudiments of what it means to be a church gathered in Jesus’ name. That where the saints are gathered, there is the presence of Jesus, the love of the Father, and the power of the Holy Spirit who frees us to praise You and effectively speak to one another. So Father, we desire the gifts of Your Spirit to be operative in our midst, that the fruit of the Spirit and the life of Christ may be produced in us. In Jesus our Lord. Amen.