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Life in the Spirit #11

Sermon Summary #11

Prophecy in Real Life Acts 21:1-16, 27-36

Up to this point in our study of the gift of prophecy in 1 Corinthians 12-14 we've looked at a number of *principles* that govern our understanding of what it is and how it operates. But the time has come for us to look more closely at prophecy in actual, real-life *practice*. And there's no better place to do that than in Acts 21. Here we come face to face with the way prophecy functioned in the concrete affairs of life and ministry.

Beginning with Acts 21, Luke continues his narration of Paul's third missionary journey that will eventually take him to Jerusalem. The two most important stops along the way are given some additional attention: the first in Tyre and then in Caesarea. In both instances, Paul is the recipient of prophetic words that, in effect, encourage him not to go to Jerusalem.

His visit to Tyre is recorded in vv. 1-6. His visit to Caesarea is described in vv. 7-16. His arrival and experience in Jerusalem is found in vv. 17-36. I'll begin by simply narrating the events as they unfold without making too many theological statements. We'll then return to the narrative to determine as best we can what it tells us about the gift of prophecy and its function in the life of the church.

A. Paul in Tyre (vv. 1-6)

Our primary concern is with v. 4 where we read that "through the Spirit they ["the disciples" of v. 4a] were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem."

Although it is not explicitly stated here, it becomes clear from the remaining narrative that they had been made aware of what awaited Paul in Jerusalem. They were understandably concerned for his welfare and safety.

B. Paul in Caesarea (vv. 7-16)

There are five things to be noted here.

First, in v. 9 Luke mentions Philip the evangelist (cf. Acts 7-8), with whom Paul stayed. Philip had "four unmarried daughters, who prophesied" (v. 9). Several observations are in order.

(1) Women can prophesy! Cf. Acts 2:17-18. There are no restrictions based on gender when it comes to the gift of prophecy. See also 1 Cor. 11:4ff. where women are said to "pray and prophesy." Anna is also described as a "prophetess" in Luke 2:36.

(2) What then can Paul mean in 1 Cor. 14:29-40 where he appears to prohibit women from speaking in church and in 1 Tim. 2:12-15 where he prohibits them from teaching and exercising authority over men? I'll have more to say about this when we return to 1 Corinthians 14, but it is clear that Paul recognized a distinction between the authority of teaching (exposition and enforcement of biblical texts) and the authority of prophecy (based on the spontaneity of a revelation). This is why it is not inconsistent for Paul to restrict the formal teaching office in the church to men while permitting, indeed encouraging women to prophesy.

(3) Some have tried to draw a connection between Philip's daughters being "unmarried" (lit., "virgins") and their prophetic ministry. The idea seems to be that it was their sexual purity that explains their spiritual sensitivity. But it is clear from 1 Cor. 11 that married women could also operate in this gift.

(4) What did they prophesy? Did they have words for Paul? We don't know, but given the fact that in the passages preceding and following the prophetic warning is that Paul not go to Jerusalem, we can assume that Philip's daughters spoke in similar terms.

Second, in vv. 10-11 we encounter Agabus and his prophetic word to Paul. This isn't the first time Agabus has appeared in Acts nor the first time he has prophesied. See Acts 11:27-30. There his prophecy was predictive and quite explicit and came to pass just as he had said. Agabus was evidently a well-respected and honored prophet and was thus listened to when he spoke. Let's again note several things in his prophetic word.

(1) We don't know how the Spirit communicated this word to Agabus. In v. 11 we read, "Thus says the Holy Spirit." This could refer to a verbal declaration by the Spirit, whether audible or inaudible we can't know, or also to general communication via some vision or dream or impression.

(2) Agabus doesn't simply speak the word to Paul but acts it out in rather dramatic fashion (for similar prophetic demonstrations, see 1 Kings 11:29-31 [the prophet Ahijah the Shilonite tore his new robe into 12 pieces to show how Solomon's kingdom would be disrupted]; Isa. 8:1-4; 20:2-4 [Isaiah went naked and barefoot to show how the Egyptians would be led into captivity by the Assyrians]; Jer. 13:1-11 [where God told Jeremiah to bury his new waste band until it was soiled and ruined to symbolize how God will destroy the pride of the Jews]; 19:1,13; 27:1-22; Ezek. 4:1-8 [Ezekiel mimicked the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem by laying siege himself to a replica of the city]; and Hosea 1:2).

He takes Paul's belt (it may have been a money belt, typically wrapped around his waist) and binds his own feet and hands.

(3) There are two specific elements in his word: **first**, "the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt," and **second**, they, the Jews, will "deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles" (v. 11).

Note well that Agabus doesn't give Paul advice based on what he's heard from the Spirit. He merely describes the revelatory word. The application, if we may call it that, comes from others.

Third, the response of Luke, Paul's traveling companions, and the believers in Caesarea is uniform. They all "urged him not to go up to Jerusalem" (v. 12b). They didn't receive the revelation but felt free to interpret its meaning and apply it to Paul's life.

Fourth, Paul chooses *not* to heed their advice (v. 13). However, the phrase you are "breaking my heart" may indicate that their warning was undermining Paul's resolute determination and at least momentarily caused him to pause and reconsider. Or perhaps his "heartbreak" was from his having to take a position opposed to people who he knew cared for him and loved him greatly: "I don't want to offend you or lead you to think that I don't love and appreciate you simply because I'm going to make a decision contrary to the one you think I should make." The simple fact is that they were making it difficult for Paul to obey what he knew to be God's will for his life. In any case, Paul says No to their urging.

Fifth, they all resigned themselves to "the will of the Lord" (v. 14). This is unusual, since the "will" of the Lord seemed already to have been discerned in v. 4 when the disciples at Tyre told Paul "through the Spirit" not to go to Jerusalem.

C. Paul in Jerusalem (vv. 17-36)

The distance from Caesarea to Jerusalem was about 65 miles, more than one day's trip. Paul's primary reason for going to Jerusalem was to deliver the money he had collected for the poverty stricken believers there (cf. 1 Cor. 16:1-4; Rom. 15:25-27).

The false rumor soon spread that Paul was telling Jewish Christians to abandon their ancestral customs and the traditions of Moses. James and the elders ask Paul to join four other men in purifying themselves in accordance with Mosaic Law. Paul agrees and does so.

If a custom was a condition for salvation or acceptance with God, then Paul always resisted. See Gal. 5:2-4. But otherwise he viewed the matter as of secondary importance and adjusted his practice to those to whom he ministered. Read 1 Cor. 9:20. **A truly liberated Christian is not under bondage to his own freedom.** Some people are actually quite legalistic about their liberty, but not Paul. If you think you *must* at all times exercise your freedom in Christ, you aren't really free!

Whereas Paul's action proved successful with the Jews in Jerusalem, others had come from Ephesus and used the occasion to renew their opposition to the apostle. Their minds were so poisoned against Paul that nothing he did would satisfy them until he was dead. They falsely accused him of taking Trophimus, a Gentile, into the temple.

There were actually four concentric rectangular inner courts in the Temple. The first was of course the Holy of Holies into which only the high priest could enter once a year. The second was the holy place for priests. The third was for Jewish men. The fourth court was for Jewish women. Gentiles were only allowed to enter the court farthest removed, beyond that of the women. A warning was posted (discovered in 1935):

"No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the temple and enclosure. Anyone who is caught trespassing will bear personal responsibility for his ensuing death."

Northwest of the temple area stood the Antonia fortress which housed a cohort of Roman troops (1,000 men). The fortress was connected with the outer court by two flights of steps, making their access both quick and easy.

When word reached them of the assault on Paul, the tribune took "soldiers and centurions" (approx. 200 total) to the rescue. The tribune's name was Claudius Lysias (Acts 23:26; 24:22). He arrests Paul and binds him with two chains (v. 33), probably to a soldier on each side.

Thus the Romans, not the Jews, bound Paul. And the Jews did not deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles but rather the Gentile Romans rescued Paul from the Jews who were trying to kill him.

Such is the narrative of events as they unfolded and as described by Luke.

The Nature of the Spiritual Gift of Prophecy

This entire narrative, together with Acts 11:28, tells us much about how prophecy functioned in the early NT church and the degree of authority it carried. Two observations will bear this out.

First, Paul clearly did not receive the warning of the disciples in Tyre as the word or will of God to him. Some have been more explicit and said that Paul simply *disobeyed* the prophetic word. In v. 4 they merely "said" to Paul or "told" Paul not to go. But in v. 12 they were repeatedly (imperfect tense) *urging* or *pleading* with them not to go. There is considerable energy and concern in their efforts to convince him that God is saying that he should not make this journey.

Paul's response is found in vv. 13-14. Why did Paul resist their warnings? See **Acts 19:21; 20:22-24**. More specifically, compare 20:22-24 with 21:4,12.

This calls for some explanation. It seems to me that there are **four** possible explanations for what we read.

(1) As noted, some suggest that Paul was deliberately disobedient to the will of God. They spoke "the word of the Lord" to him and he said No. This is highly unlikely.

(2) I don't know anyone who would actually argue for the second option, but we have to wrestle with the possibility that the Holy Spirit made a mistake or perhaps changed his mind. Earlier in Acts 19:21 and 20:22-24 the Spirit had told Paul to go (in 20:22a Paul says he is "constrained" or "bound" by the Spirit to go) but now, for whatever reason, the Spirit speaks through these disciples and prophets and says "No, don't go."

However, in v. 14 we read that when they realized they couldn't persuade Paul not to go they entrusted him to "the will of the Lord." It seems that they initially believed it was the will of God for him not to go but later were at least willing to entertain the possibility that it *was* God's will for him to go. Had they misheard God the first time (in v. 4)? I don't think so.

(3) Some would contend that what we have here is simply not a prophecy at all but little more than advice from concerned friends. But in v. 4 they spoke to Paul "**through the Spirit**" which is the same phrase used in Acts 11:28 where Agabus prophesied the coming famine. Even if one ends up saying this isn't a prophecy, we still have to reckon with the reality of people hearing the Spirit's voice, communicating this to Paul, and Paul in turn choosing not to believe it was the absolute and infallible word of the Lord for him, resulting in his rejection of their advice.

(4) It seems to me there is only one legitimate option. Through some supernatural means that is not specified, the Holy Spirit communicated to the believers at Tyre that if Paul went to Jerusalem he would be persecuted, perhaps even killed. On the basis or on the grounds of this revelation, they in turn *interpreted* this to be God's warning for him not to go. They then *applied* this to Paul by issuing a stringent warning and urged him to change his plans.

Let's consider again these three elements in every prophecy: *revelation* [the actual vision of Paul being beaten], *interpretation* [if you go to Jerusalem you will suffer greatly], *application* [it isn't God's will for you to go to Jerusalem].

On this scenario, the disciples at Tyre, and later at Caesarea, all received the same revelation. They either had a distinct impression in their hearts or heard the Spirit speak audibly or more likely had a vision of Paul being threatened and beaten and perhaps in prison. This *revelation* was unmistakable. Because this revelation was from God, it was infallible and altogether true.

But they then *interpreted* the revelation as meaning that extremely perilous times awaited Paul. He was subject to severe persecution, perhaps even martyrdom.

This in turn led to the *application*. They concluded that *it was not God's will* for Paul to go to Jerusalem. It simply didn't register with them that going to Jerusalem could be a good thing. Why would anyone venture into a territory where he knew persecution was certain to occur? And why would God lead him there? Combined with their love for him and their desire for his safety, they told and even urged him not to go.

In other words, they got the revelation right, as well as the interpretation, but misapplied it in terms of how Paul should react.

What should they have done? Once they received the revelation, they should have prayed about it, discussed it among themselves, and then sat down with Paul and shared it with him without interpreting it and applying it.

I can only conclude that whereas Paul didn't question the validity of the revelation they received, neither did he believe that they were speaking to him the very words of God such that disobedience would constitute a sin. In other words, based on previous and oft-repeated guidance from the Spirit, Paul knew that whereas they had heard God correctly they had to some extent misinterpreted and assuredly misapplied what he said.

Is this not what happens in many prophetic words today? Some illustrations may help:

Often people receive revelatory words concerning someone's physical affliction; when combined with the compassion of the prophet and the misguided belief that God always wills to heal, a person doesn't stop with the revelation or doesn't rest content with praying for the person but actually predicts their healing!

Or perhaps the revelation is interpreted as an unconditional promise when in fact it is either (1) conditional (dependent on someone's obedience or other factors falling into place) or an (2) invitation, or an (3) opportunity that may in the future present itself if other circumstances turn out favorably.

Or consider the many prophetic words and dreams, etc. concerning our going to Wheaton College in 2000. No one told us: "It is God's will for you to go." We interpreted them as impending offers and an opportunity that we were free to accept or reject. That decision itself would be based on other factors (desire, timing, family, wisdom, best use of my gifting, opportunity, etc.).

Second, this understanding of the nature of prophecy and how it is generally a mixture of infallible divine revelation and fallible human interpretation and application is seen in the word delivered by Agabus.

As earlier noted, there are two specific elements in his word: First, "the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt," and second, they, the Jews, will "deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles" (v. 11). In both cases, **Agabus was wrong!**

Let's look at them in turn. First, Luke tells us twice that it wasn't the Jews who bound Paul but rather the Romans. Note again: Agabus didn't prophesy that "Paul will be bound" but rather "the **JEW**S at Jerusalem will bind" him. But note **21:33** and again **22:29**.

Then, second, Agabus said that the Jews "will deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles". Wayne Grudem has correctly pointed out that in the 119 other instances of this word "deliver" in the NT, every one of them describes an act that is conscious and intentional and willing. In his commentary on Acts, Darrell Bock writes:

"The reference to Jewish involvement in the binding here is 'causative' in force: the Jews will not physically bind Paul but will be responsible for his being arrested (21:27,30,33). The prophecy is accurate in this sense and is not to be pressed too literally" (Bock, 638). O. P. Robertson says my interpretation is guilty of "precisionism" (*The Final Word*, 114).

"As predicted in general terms in 21:11, a Jewish reaction has led to Paul being bound" (Bock, 653).

The problem with Bock's interpretation is that it's not what Agabus said. He did not speak in generalities but in very specific language! He said the Jews themselves will consciously and deliberately "deliver" over Paul to the Gentiles. The fact is, they did no such thing. They first tried to kill him (v. 31), making it necessary for the Romans, the Gentiles, to rescue him from their clutches. Luke says in v. 35 that the Romans had to "carry" Paul to safety.

Would it not make much better sense if we understand Agabus to have received a revelation, probably a vision, of Paul surrounded by an angry Jewish mob, bound hand and foot, and then in Gentile custody, which he interpreted as meaning that the Jews would bind him and deliver him to the Gentiles? Of course, it is true that Agabus is never said to have told Paul, based on this revelation, that he should not go to Jerusalem, but Luke and his other traveling companions and most if not all at Caesarea did. One can only assume that Agabus would have added his voice to this chorus.

And what of Agabus prefacing his word with: "**Thus says the Holy Spirit**"? There is no easy answer to this. I'm inclined to believe that Agabus himself collapsed his own interpretation into the divine revelation and failed to differentiate between the two, and then spoke as if God had revealed both to him. In other words, he believed that what he saw meant that the Jews would do these two things and spoke it forth as the word of the Spirit. Luke simply records what Agabus said without necessarily endorsing the interpretation that Agabus had placed upon the details.

One final point. I find it remarkably ironic that cessationists insist on arguing that we are pressing the details of Agabus' word and that we should not expect such precision in the fulfillment of a prophecy, only then to constantly criticize and eventually reject the legitimacy of charismatic prophetic ministry today on the basis of what they see as the frequent failure to get all the details exactly right! Why do they grant Agabus leeway that they deny to us? In other words, they allow Agabus to make small errors but not contemporary continuationists! Be consistent!

What, then, may we conclude about the nature and operation of the spiritual gift of prophecy in the NT?

Ten practical implications and guidelines for prophetic ministry in the light of the events of Acts 21

(1) There is no indication they were determined to control Paul's life. They were clearly motivated by love for the Apostle and concern for his physical welfare. See Acts 21:13-14 ("weeping") which indicates that they were not trying to manipulate Paul's ministry: they wanted God's will to be done.

(2) Paul took very seriously their counsel even though he believed it to be misguided. He did not casually dismiss their prophetic urging and was willing to process the word with others. In other words, he listened carefully to their interpretation of the vision and was grieved that he found himself in a position where he had to disagree with them and disobey their advice. See 21:13-14.

(3) We should always be open to the possibility that no matter how clearly we think we have heard from the Spirit, we may be wrong. We must cultivate **prophetic humility!** Some are simply unwilling to entertain the possibility that they made a mistake in some aspect of the revelatory experience and arrogantly seek to impose their will on others in order to preserve their reputation as uniquely gifted and anointed.

(4) Paul judged the validity of the word based on his own prior encounter with the Spirit.

(5) Be very, very careful before you move from the revelation to its interpretation and application. Don't think that you have fallen short of your responsibility to God or to others or that your prophetic gift is inadequate or incomplete if you don't get the interpretation or application. Simply because you have great clarity in the revelation does not mean God intends to enlighten you as to its application.

(6) Simply because these prophets got the interpretation and application wrong does not mean they are **false prophets**. They are not disciplined or rebuked or set out of ministry.

(7) Why did God give this revelation to them? If it was not to dissuade Paul from going to Jerusalem, what was the point of it all? What did God expect them to do with it? (1) Could this have been one more example of the Spirit doing what Paul described in Acts 20:23, only this time he did it indirectly through others rather than directly? Thus the purpose was to reinforce in Paul's heart what awaited him and thus help prepare him for the hardships ahead. (2) Undoubtedly it was to stir them to intercede on Paul's behalf.

(8) Note well that even Luke was involved in the error (Acts 21:12). Even your closest friends and co-workers can misapply a prophetic word designed for you.

(9) There's no indication that those who spoke this word or those that joined them in urging Paul not to go ever changed their mind about the accuracy of their application! In other words, Paul was unable to convince them they were wrong (see 21:14). They agreed to disagree and to entrust themselves, especially Paul, to the will of God. There was no gridlock as a result of this incident. Paul's missionary journeys were not stalled or paralyzed.

(10) Evidently Luke didn't see their mistake as being fatal or a threat to the validity of prophetic ministry. At no time after Acts 21:36 does he say: "Oops," or "We repent" or "Prophecy is dangerous and to be avoided." In other words, contrary to what many suggest, errors like this do not disqualify people as prophetically gifted nor does it render prophecy unimportant for the church.