

# What is Biblical Prophecy?

By Nathan Warner

What is prophecy? What does it mean to prophesy? Is it insight into the future, revelation from Heaven, hearing directly from God?

In the Old Testament, God told Ezekiel: “**Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, ‘Thus says the Lord God, ‘Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they come to life’**” (Ezekiel 37:9b, NASB).

The Hebrew word here is “naba”: “A primitive root; to prophesy, i.e. **Speak (or sing) by inspiration (in prediction or simple discourse)**” (Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance).

Paul, speaking to Believers in the New Testament says, “*Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. 9 For we know in part and we **prophesy** in part; 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away*” (1 Corinthians 13:8-10).

The Greek word here is “prophetes,” which means “to foretell events, divine, **speaking under inspiration**, exercise the prophetic office – prophesy” (Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance).

We can see from the meaning of these words a broader sense to prophecy than predicting the future or just foretelling future events. It means in its most basic form, “speaking by inspiration.” Who is doing the inspiring? Well, that depends on whether the prophet is of God or is false. False prophets were inspired by the demons of their gods and their own human spirits. True prophets were inspired by God, of course, but more specifically the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is what causes people to “speak” under His inspiration or direction. The Holy Spirit inspires God’s Will by His Word in the hearts and minds of Believers. We see this clearly in the Old and New Testament.

## OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETS

We have a very good picture of prophecy in the Old Testament, where we see the testimony of God concerning the nature of man, God’s character, and God’s future plan for the world, Israel, and Salvation, given as signs for God’s glory when they came to pass.

Prophecies were delivered by the Holy Spirit to certain men (called prophets) to be shared with those around them, as God directed.

Prophets would convey God’s Word concerning future events, God’s purpose in Israel and the world, man’s accountability to God, warnings of judgment, and a call to return to God. One of the primary roles of a prophet was to expose sin:

*“Your prophets have seen for you false and foolish visions; **and they have not exposed your iniquity so as to restore you from captivity**, but they have seen for you false and misleading oracles.” (Lamentations 2:14)*

Another important focus of the prophets was looking ahead to the coming of Jesus Christ under the direction, indication, or inspiration of the Holy Spirit:

*“As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful searches and inquiries, 11 [seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow.”*

(1 Peter 1:10-11)

We learn here that the prophets were like the New Testament Bereans, who “*received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so*” (Acts 17:11b). God takes His Word seriously, and we should too:

*“But the person who does anything defiantly, whether he is native or an alien, that one is blaspheming the Lord; and that person shall be cut off from among his people. 31 Because he has despised the word of the Lord and has broken His commandment, that person shall be completely cut off; his guilt will be on him.”* (Numbers 15:30-31)

### THE HOLY SPIRIT IS THE SOURCE OF PROPHECY

We see from the Scriptures that the Holy Spirit is the source of true prophecy:

Speaking to Saul: *“Then the Spirit of the Lord will come upon you mightily, and you shall prophesy with them and be changed into another man.”* (1 Samuel 10:6)

*“Now these are the last words of David. David the son of Jesse declares, the man who was raised on high declares, the anointed of the God of Jacob, and the sweet psalmist of Israel, 2 ‘The Spirit of the Lord spoke by me, and His word was on my tongue.’”* (2 Samuel 23:1-2)

*“Then the Spirit of God came on Zechariah the son of Jehoiada the priest; and he stood above the people and said to them, ‘Thus God has said, “Why do you transgress the commandments of the Lord and do not prosper? Because you have forsaken the Lord, He has also forsaken you.”’”* (2 Chronicles 24:20)

*“You gave Your good Spirit to instruct them, Your manna You did not withhold from their mouth, And You gave them water for their thirst.”* (Nehemiah 9:20)

*“However, You bore with them for many years, And admonished them by Your Spirit through Your prophets, yet they would not give ear. Therefore You gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands.”* (Nehemiah 9:30)

### NEW TESTAMENT PROPHETS

Is prophecy only an Old Testament phenomenon? No. Jesus and His Apostles also prophesied – the Apostle John delivering one of the greatest of all prophecies in the book of Revelation. All of this was done through the Holy Spirit:

*“At that very time He [Jesus] rejoiced greatly in the Holy Spirit, and said, ‘I praise You, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight.’”*  
(Luke 10:21)

*“When they had placed them in the center, they began to inquire, ‘By what power, or in what name, have you done this?’ 8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, ‘Rulers and elders of the people, 9 if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, 10 let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this name this man stands here before you in good health. 11 He is the stone which was rejected by you, the builders, but which became the chief corner stone. 12 And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.’” (Acts 4:7-12)*

*“And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness.” (Acts 4:31)*

### DOES CHURCH PROPHECY SUPERCEDE SCRIPTURAL REVELATION?

Does prophecy end with the Apostles as some claim? No. We see in the generations following the Apostles that there were prophets and prophetesses.

However, there is an important distinction to be made. Old Testament prophets were given Scriptural revelation by the Holy Spirit concerning the coming Christ, future events for Israel, etc. These things became part of God’s sacred Word. In the New Testament, only the Apostles – those to whom Jesus spoke and taught were given Scriptural revelation, which became the New Testament Scriptures. This is why Peter makes the distinction between Scriptural revelation (not subject to your interpretation) and personal revelation (sometimes partially interpreted incorrectly – see page 8):

*“So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts. 20 But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, 21 for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” (2 Peter 1:19-21)*

To the Apostles only was revealed the divine revelation concerning the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

*“God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, 2 in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.” (Hebrews 1:1-2)*

They wrote this revelation down for our benefit as the testimony of Jesus Christ. No Believer beyond the Apostles can add to or subtract from God’s written Word. So, we need to understand that the testimony of the Gospel is sealed through their prophecy. We can find no examples in the New Testament of Believers outside the Apostles adding or subtracting revelation from the inspired delivery of the Gospel, nor can anyone today. The Holy Spirit does not deliver

Scriptural revelation anymore, because it began and ended in the words spoken by Christ and heard by the Apostles, which the Holy Spirit brought to their remembrance after Jesus departed.

## NO NEW SCRIPTURAL REVELATION IN THE CHURCH

We see that for the Believer, the Holy Spirit does not give us new Scriptural revelation (adding to or subtracting from God's Word), because the Holy Spirit teaches us from the words of Jesus – He brings to our remembrance all that Jesus spoke to us. For the Apostles, this was new revelation – they didn't have the words of Jesus written down, but they had been with Jesus when He spoke the words, and the Spirit brought them to their memory. For us, we have the words of Jesus written down, thanks to the Apostles' testimony, so the Holy Spirit brings these words to our remembrance and teaches us all things from them:

*“These things I have spoken to you while abiding with you. 26 But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.” (John 14:25-26)*

For the Believer today, we must understand from Scripture there can be no new prophecy as revelation that adds or subtracts from the prophetic Word of revelation in the Scriptures. Paul rebuked Believers who were straying from the Word of God and using the gift of prophecy as an excuse to add or subtract from Scripture:

*“Was it from you that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only? 37 If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment. 38 But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not (to be) recognized. 39 Therefore, my brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak in tongues.” (1 Corinthians 14:36-39)*

Paul was an Apostle, chosen by Jesus to join the ranks of the original eleven to establish the revelation of His Word in the Gospel. He shared this revelation – the Gospel – everywhere he travelled, including in Corinth. Those who believed put their faith in Jesus Christ through Paul's testimony of the Gospel. This was “the Lord's commandment,” which any “prophet” in the Church had to submit to and acknowledge and never contradict or attempt to change. Thus, the Word of God is the first and last prophetic revelation concerning God's nature, man's nature, and salvation in Jesus Christ. And no modern “Christian” can add or subtract to the revelation of Scripture.

## PROPHETIC REVELATION IN THE CHURCH

If this is the case, what is the gift of prophecy in the Body of Christ? The foundational

expression of the prophetic gift in the Church is to speak the Word of God under the inspiration (or direction) of the Spirit. Nearly all Believers at one time or another can attest to this – when you earnestly feel the Spirit move you to speak a Scripture into a situation to edify people searching for answers, confront false teachings, console people in pain, etc. That “word of the Lord” comes to you in that moment.

When Jesus told His disciples to not prepare in advance what we would say, He made it clear that this was because the Holy Spirit would give them the words to say. This is the heart of prophecy:

*“When they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not worry about how or what you are to speak in your defense, or what you are to say; 12 for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.” (Luke 12:11-12)*

For us today, this is often Scripture (the Word of God) brought to our minds by the Spirit in the moment to encourage, edify, correct, and rebuke.

### PERSONAL REVELATION

Does the gift of prophecy begin and end with speaking Scripture under the inspiration of the Spirit? Clearly not, as there are examples throughout the New Testament and Church history of Believers delivering “personal revelation” to other Believers – relating to someone’s life or conveying God’s direction in someone’s life. We see examples of Believers in the Church who divinely foretold future events under the direction of the Holy Spirit as **personal revelation**:

*“As we were staying there for some days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. 11 And coming to us, he took Paul’s belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, ‘This is what the Holy Spirit says: “In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.”’ 12 When we had heard this, we as well as the local residents began begging him not to go up to Jerusalem.” (Acts 21:10-12)*

Consider Simeon: *“And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.” (Luke 2:26)*

It is also important to note that both males and females exercised the gift of prophecy in the early Church:

*“On the next day we left and came to Caesarea, and entering the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, we stayed with him. 9 Now this man had four virgin daughters who were prophetesses.” (Acts 21:8-9)*

*“Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head. 5 But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head, for she is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved.” (1 Corinthians 11:4-5)*

Modern Believers such as Betsie ten Boom had visions while suffering in the Nazi

concentration camps of future events that would later happen in her sister Corrie's life. These visions were given to Betsie to encourage and console Corrie:

“One night as they were lying on their bunks, Betsie whispered to Corrie, ‘I can see a house, somewhere in Holland. It is a beautiful house with a large garden. There is a large hall with a carved wooden staircase. We are going to look after people who have been hurt in the war, until they can live a normal life again. Corrie, I believe God is going to give us a house like this.’ Later on, Betsie had another vision. This time she saw a concentration camp in Germany. But there was no barbed wire in this camp, and there were no guards. All the buildings were painted a cheerful green. It was a camp for German people that had been hurt by the evil of Hitler, even people like the guards at Ravensbruck, who had been taught to be so cruel.” (*The Hiding Place – an abridged version* by David Wallington)

As it turned out, Betsie died in the camps – her interpretation of these prophetic visions or revelations was not fully correct, but the actual visions were correct as Corrie saw the visions become a reality years later during her ministry. These prophetic visions and revelations do not add or subtract from Scripture. They are given by the Spirit to correct, teach, or encourage Believers in their life situations: “*One who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation*” (1 Corinthians 14:3b).

#### PROPHECY—A GIFT IN THE BODY

Paul explained to the church that prophecy is a gift of the Holy Spirit to the Body of Christ, listed in the same place as service, teaching, exhorting, and leading. Like all spiritual gifts, the gift of prophecy was not given to everyone but as the Spirit willed:

*“For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. 4 For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. 6 Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; 7 if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching.”*  
(Romans 12:3-7)

*“If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.”* (1 Corinthians 13:1-2)

*“Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. 2 For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God; for no one understands, but in his spirit he speaks mysteries. 3 **But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation.** One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself; **but one who prophesies edifies the church.** Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues, but even more that you would prophesy; and greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues,*

*unless he interprets, so that the church may receive edifying.*” (1 Corinthians 14:1-5)

*“So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; **but prophecy is for a sign, not to unbelievers but to those who believe.**”* (1 Corinthians 14:22)

*“And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues.”* (1 Corinthians 12:28)

*“All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they?”* (1 Corinthians 12:29)

*“Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part; 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.”* (1 Corinthians 13:8-10)

*“And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.”* (Ephesians 4:11-12)

#### DO NOT DESPISE PROPHECY, BUT PRACTICE DISCERNMENT

We are not to discourage or despise the exercise of prophecy in the Church. However, the Church leadership and Body must practice great discernment. Any expression of the Word of God for *“edification and exhortation and consolation”* (1 Corinthians 14:3b) or to direct people or situations to certain beliefs or outcomes must be examined very carefully – tested to see if it is truly consistent with God’s Word and the Spirit. Similarly, any personal “revelation” delivered to us from someone directing us to do something or “showing” us something that will happen in the future, must also be very carefully discerned: *“Do not quench the Spirit; 20 do not despise prophetic utterances. 21 **But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good**”* (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21). This is why Paul explains that any prophetic speech in the Church must be subject to the judgment of the Body of Christ to determine if the spirit behind it is truly the Spirit behind God’s Word. It is also to be done orderly:

*“**Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment.** 30 But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, the first one must keep silent. 31 For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; 32 and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; 33 for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.”* (1 Corinthians 14:29-33)

#### FALSE PROPHETS

Discernment is crucial because Scripture warns us about the dangers of false teachers and false prophets. God says that He allows false prophets as a test of our hearts – are we relying on His Spirit or not?

*“If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, 2 and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, ‘Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them,’ 3 you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. 4 You shall follow the Lord your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him.” (Deuteronomy 13:1-4)*

We are warned in Scripture about the dangers of false prophets and teachers who we may encounter inside and outside the Church. We are to test the spirits behind the words to make sure the words are of the Holy Spirit:

*“Beloved, 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.” (1 John 4:1)*

*“But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves.” (2 Peter 2:1)*

*“Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. 16 You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they?” (Matthew 7:15)*

*“Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name. 10 At that time many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another. 11 **Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many.** 12 Because lawlessness is increased, most people’s love will grow cold.” (Matthew 24:9-12)*

In these last days, we must especially exercise caution and discernment as there has been a literal explosion of false prophets in the Church, drawing Believers into all kinds of false teaching and false behavior with all “signs and wonders,” claiming to have the gifts of “prophecy” and “healing.” These things draw followers whom the “prophets” manipulate and extort for personal gain:

*“There is a conspiracy of her prophets in her midst like a roaring lion tearing the prey. They have devoured lives; they have taken treasure and precious things; they have made many widows in the midst of her.” (Ezekiel 22:25)*

This speaks as relevantly today as it did in the time of Ezekiel. But the most nefarious thing false prophets and false teachers do is to claim they speak for God. In order to profit and abuse people, they must put forth “words from God” which are not His words. They purposefully misinterpret Scripture or convey a “new” word that supersedes the authority of Scripture. In all this, they emphasize the spiritual gift of prophecy over and above the authority of Scripture. After all, why rely on the “old news” of the Bible, when you can get up-to-date news through



“the spirit,” just not the Spirit of God. In this way, they give themselves a blank canvas to add and subtract anything they want from God’s Word—making their words the “new words of God.” Through-out Scripture, God delivers severe warnings about men who do this:

*“Thus says the Lord God, ‘Woe to the foolish prophets who are following their own spirit and have seen nothing. 4 O Israel, your prophets have been like foxes among ruins. 5 You have not gone up into the breaches, nor did you build the wall around the house of Israel to stand in the battle on the day of the Lord. 6 They see falsehood and lying divination who are saying, “The Lord declares,” when the Lord has not sent them; yet they hope for the fulfillment of their word. 7 Did you not see a false vision and speak a lying divination when you said, “The Lord declares,” but it is not I who have spoken?’” (Ezekiel 13:3-7)*

*“Her prophets have smeared whitewash for them, seeing false visions and divining lies for them, saying, ‘Thus says the Lord God,’ when the Lord has not spoken.” (Ezekiel 22:28)*

Speaking a word that you claim is God’s Word when it isn’t from Him is by far the most dangerous thing a person can do. God takes it very seriously. We know from Scripture that the Holy Spirit does not add or subtract from what He has delivered to us in God’s Word; therefore, there is no such thing as “new news,” only the GOOD NEWS of the Gospel, which stands as God’s eternal revelation to mankind concerning all things that God wants us to know at this time.

#### PROPHECY IS NO LIGHT MATTER

Because God takes prophecy so seriously, Believers should take great care with the gift of prophecy and be sure the Spirit is truly directing it. Therefore, consider carefully before speaking. Is it the Holy Spirit or your spirit that directs you to speak? Are you speaking God’s Word correctly? Did God really give you insight into someone’s situation, or are you seeking to impart your own wisdom? Are our minds set on the things of the Spirit?

*“For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.” (Romans 8:5)*

*“But just as it is written, ‘Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, And which have not entered the heart of man, All that God has prepared for those who love Him.’ 10 For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. 11 For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God.” (1 Corinthians 2:9-11)*

Even so. Amen.