

# Prophecy

**Ephesians 4:11....Are there “prophets” in the New Testament too?**

The word “Prophets” in **Ephesians 4:11** is included in the gifts Jesus gave his church after he ascended to his Father. In Part 1 on prophecy, then, we ask: “Are there prophets in the church **today** as well, and how do we know?”

The obvious place to begin is the context of verse 11, which begins four verses back in **verses 7-11**: “But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: ‘When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people.’ (What does ‘he ascended’ mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) So Christ himself gave the apostles, **the prophets**, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers... “

So what we’ve got so far is this picture of Jesus - the same Jesus who came down to us from heaven as a human being - ascending back to heaven after his resurrection with all the power and authority he needs in both heaven and earth to start the era of “grace” rolling as he “apportioned (or allocated) it.” This grace of his **included the giving of specific gifts**, and there’s no doubt that one of those gifts in the New Testament is the existence of “prophets.”

All we’re doing so far, then, is looking at the context and taking these verses at face value. But the context doesn’t end there, because there’s a comma at the end of verse 11, and an explanation is then given in **verses 12-16** as to why Jesus allocated these gifts of grace to his church: it’s “to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

So what we’ve got now is the **reason why** Jesus apportioned this gift of prophets, which in the context of these five verses is:

- 1) To serve in and build his church.
- 2) And this will continue until we all come to such faith in and knowledge of Christ that it's like being filled with the fullness of Jesus himself.
- 3) Hopefully, then, we're not acting like children anymore, easily taken in or blown about by the endless stream of deception being pedalled by cunning and crafty people.
- 4) And this will give us the courage to stand up for and speak the truth in love to each other, so that in everything we say, do and teach we're becoming more like Jesus, because he is our primary focus.
- 5) And this will happen when we're all playing the part Jesus has given us for the sake of everyone else in the church, so the whole church grows and matures together into a healthy body full of love.

And there you have Jesus' reasons for creating prophets: HIS focus is entirely on maturing his church into a loving, healthy body of people deeply concerned about protecting each other from the junk being pedalled by people who don't share Jesus' purpose and have no interest in it.

Ephesians 4, then, cannot be ignored - on two counts: that, first of all, it tells us prophets exist in the New Testament and why. But it also hands us a jolly good way of evaluating prophets too: Are they acting in love for their fellow Christians?

Other scriptures back up these two points too, like **1 Corinthians 14**, which starts off in **verse 1** by saying the "gift of prophecy" is something to be cherished, because in **verses 3-4** (and **verse 31**) it strengthens, encourages, comforts, edifies and instructs the church. In other words, **love for one's fellow Christians** is the motivation behind it.

So now we've got the reason for prophets, and their motivation. But what does Paul actually mean by the word "prophecy"?

He gives us two clues: the first in **verses 29-30**, where he talks of "two or three prophets speaking," but "if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop." So prophecy is a **sudden revelation**, and that's fine with Paul if that revelation is "instructive and encouraging" to the church" (**verse 31**).

The other clue is in the previous chapter, **1 Corinthians 13:2**, that says: "If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge..., " which again indicates that prophecy is very much about "revelation" too - the revelation of "mysteries" and knowledge as yet undiscovered.

But again, if the revelation is not done in love the prophet and his prophecies mean “nothing” (same verse). So on two counts in Corinthians prophecy means revelation, which now gives us the reason for prophets, and their motivation, and what prophecy is, as defined by Paul.

Are there any actual instances, then, of prophets in the New Testament making prophecies that fulfill all these criteria? Yes, there are. There’s a good example in **Acts 11:27-28**, when Saul and Barnabas are in Antioch in 44 AD and prophets arrive from Jerusalem, one of whom, AGABUS, ”predicted a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world (in the reign of Claudius Caesar).” Several historians (including Josephus) confirm the famines that struck the Roman world at that time, one of which, four years into Claudius’ reign in 45 AD, hit Judea and Jerusalem hard.

Agabus’ prophecy was jolly helpful, therefore. It enabled “The disciples” in Antioch, **verses 29-30**, “to provide help for the brothers in Judea, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.” So this tied in perfectly with the purpose of prophets, which was giving a revelation made in love for the sake of the church - and it happened exactly as predicted too.

Note that neither Paul or Barnabas predicted the famine. Instead it was given to a prophet, Agabus, who appears again in Acts 21:10 to make another prophecy. In **verse 11**, “he took Paul’s belt and tied his own hands and feet with it” as a prophecy of the “Jews in Jerusalem binding the owner of this belt and handing him over to the Gentiles.”

But what that prophecy did was make Paul even more determined “to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus,” **verse 13**, and it prepared Paul for it too. So again it was a very specific revelation made in love for Paul’s sake, to give him the courage to follow where God was leading him (Acts 23:11), even if it meant death for him.

There are many other verses about prophets in the New Testament, like Philip’s “four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy” in **Acts 21:8-9**, but nothing is mentioned about what his daughters predicted or why. On the other hand, Judas and Silas in **Acts 15:32** were prophets too, and they “said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers.” So again a prophet’s motivation was love for those in the church.

There is, however, another set of verses that indicate a **further reason why** prophecy was needed in the early church (or why prophecy is needed at any time for that matter), starting in **Ephesians 3:1-3...**

“For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles - surely you have heard about the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you, that is, **the mystery made known to me by revelation**, as I have already written briefly.”

Notice the term “the administration of God’s grace” that Paul uses in **verse 2**. It takes us back to where we began this study in Ephesians 4:7, where Paul writes: “to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.” Well, here we’ve got an actual example in Ephesians 3 of Jesus apportioning (or administering) his grace to Paul himself.

And how does Jesus apportion and administer his grace to Paul? Very clearly: he “makes known a mystery (to Paul) by revelation,” the exact meaning of prophecy we covered already back in 1 Corinthians 13 and 14. It wasn’t the same kind of prophecy that Agabus came up with, though, which involved a warning about a specific event that was relevant and helpful to the church or to Paul in a time of immediate need. But it was still a revelation in Ephesians, and a revelation of **much greater importance** too, than just predicting an event like a famine, or Paul having his hands and feet tied if he went to Jerusalem.

And what that ‘much greater revelation’ was is described in **Ephesians 3:4-6**. “In reading this, then,” Paul writes, “you will be able to understand my insight into **the mystery of Christ**, which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets. **This mystery** is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.”

Notice some key points here:

- 1) The revelation given to Paul in verse 4 was “insight into the mystery of Christ.” That was the focus and point of it.
- 2) Whatever this mystery of Christ was it was “not made known” until the Spirit revealed it to the apostles **and prophets** in the New Testament. No one could have figured out this mystery themselves, therefore. It was brand new knowledge as yet undiscovered by anyone. It was truly a “revelation” from God through a prophet, which made Paul a prophet too, then, right?
- 3) And who would have guessed that this revelation about Christ involved “the Gentiles being heirs together with Israel”? Would I, for instance, as a typical Gentile, have ever taken notice of Christianity if it hadn’t been revealed to me what Israel was all about in the Old Testament, and that I could be a part of it?

But this is what Paul realized his gift of revelation and prophecy from Jesus was for, as we read in **verses 7-11**. “I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all the Lord’s people, **this grace was given me to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ**, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the **manifold wisdom of God should be made known** to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to **his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.**”

Notice some key points here too:

- 1) Paul repeats that his gift came from God’s grace and power, and not because he, Paul, was anyone special (verses 7-8).
- 2) The purpose of God giving him the gift of prophecy was to explain and “make plain” to us Gentiles “the unsearchable riches of Christ” - that God had not revealed to anyone up ’til that point in time (verses 8-9).
- 3) That’s because God is only revealing what he’s made possible in Jesus “through the church,” verse 10. God waited until the church existed, and that’s when even the supernatural beings in the “heavenly realms” first get to hear and see the mysteries of Christ’s unsearchable riches explained and revealed too.
- 4) So the timing of prophecy and revelation is all God’s, and for one key reason, to fit in perfectly with his eternal purpose of revealing what he’s made possible in his Son. Real prophecy, therefore, the kind that defines prophecy as revealing undiscovered knowledge, is totally focused on Jesus.

And why is that? The answer is in the next verse, **verse 12**: It’s so that “In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.”

It is only when we understand what God accomplished through Jesus that we see God as he really is, and when we see him as he is, that’s when we totally trust our lives to him, and all our worries, fears and anxieties are swept away.

The test of this kind of prophet in the New Testament, therefore, isn’t whether his specific prophecies about events and people come to pass, or not. It’s in the freedom and confidence that grows in us from **knowing what God accomplished in Christ**, which he first made clear in the history of Israel, that then led up to all that Israel was incapable of doing being fulfilled in Christ, that is now open to us Gentiles too, the first inklings of which were revealed through the apostles and prophets of the New Testament, and in particular through Paul, as explained here in Ephesians 3.

And **1 John 4** confirms this too, when John writes in **verse 1**, “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.”

The test of spirits then follows in **verses 2-3**: “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. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.”

John makes it so easy, doesn't he? He zeroes in on just one key point, on the human Jesus, because it was only in what God accomplished in Jesus - **in his life and death as a human being** - that God opened up “his eternal purpose,” as Ephesians 3:11 phrases it, to us Gentiles and Jews alike. And according to Paul this could only have been revealed by God, because we couldn't see it, or discover it, or realize it by ourselves (Galatians 1:12).

So God provided us with apostles and prophets, and gifted them with the ability to reveal his eternal purpose in his Son, and that's how we judge if a prophet of this kind is true or false. Is he motivated by, and focused on, making clear **what God made possible in sending Jesus as a human being to us?**

But how does all this compare to what the prophet Agabus was doing? Agabus wasn't motivated by or focused on making clear what God had made possible through the human Jesus, was he? He was into predicting specific events happening to specific people in a time of immediate need.

It appears, then, that in the New Testament there are **TWO types of prophet**, both of whom God gifted, but for different purposes. There was Paul, who was given the gift of revealing the unsearchable riches of Christ, and there was Agabus given the gift of revealing specific events about to happen, like famines, and what would happen to Paul if he went to Jerusalem.

With the Agabus-type prophet it's easy to spot a fake, because the conditions of his prophecies are very strict. His prophecies had better be spelled out in clear detail, they had to meet an immediate need in the church, and they'd better happen exactly as predicted.

The reason, motive and result of his prophecies must fit all these conditions. And they're all spelled out in Scripture for us in the church to read too, so we have clear directions for detecting who is a true prophet and who is whistling in the wind when making prophecies about people, nations and world events.

Anybody claiming to be a prophet today, therefore, is taking a huge risk in predicting events happening to people and nations, because their credibility rests or falls on these clear scriptural conditions being met. They're also risking **Galatians 5:10**, which says: "The one throwing you into confusion will pay the penalty, whoever he may be," and we need look no further than our own church as proof of it, because our founder, Herbert Armstrong, was confusing.

For example: In the Worldwide Church of God magazine, *Tomorrows World*, February 1972, Mr. Armstrong stated: "Emphatically I am NOT a prophet, in the sense of one to whom God speaks specially and directly, revealing personally a future event to happen or new truth, or new and special instruction direct from God - separate from, and apart from what is contained in the Bible." But for 52 years he and others in the WCG made over two hundred prophecies about future events to happen that didn't happen as predicted (which are listed in detail on the internet).

But in that same *Tomorrows World*, same month, he stated: "I don't feel the need to apologize" for appearing to set dates, and in that same *Tomorrow's World* he even went so far as to say, "As of the present I, and a majority of our historians in Ambassador College, and researchers in the School of Theology, feel that it is utterly unsafe to try to set dates in regard to prophesied events." And yet he continued to set dates in regard to prophesied events, and when they too failed he either ignored them or simply changed the dates.

It was highly confusing, because on the one hand he stated in that same *Tomorrows World*, "Emphatically I am NOT a prophet, And I never have claimed to be," but on the other hand he stated in the February 1967 *Plain Truth*, page 47: "The DAY OF THE ETERNAL- a time foretold in more than thirty prophecies - is going to strike between 5 and 10 years from now! You will *know*, then, how REAL it is. You will wish, then, you had heeded. I am not writing foolishly, but very soberly, on AUTHORITY of the *living CHRIST!*"

And just as Galatians 5:10 stated, we paid a heavy penalty for that, because the WCG is no more. It's gone, and people coming to our church now have probably never even heard of Herbert Armstrong. But he taught us old-timers a valuable lesson, that if you set yourself up as a prophet predicting what's going to happen to nations and world leaders or world conditions, it's a mug's game, because prophecies of that sort fail, and excuses for them failing will sound so lame they would be laughable if they weren't so sad. And many of these prophets end up so bizarre in their prophecies that you wonder how on earth anyone can continue to think these people are credible.

But that's nothing new because the same thing happened back in the first century, according to this little gem from William Barclay on prophets in **Ephesians 4:11**: "The prophets were wanderers throughout the Church. They had no homes, no families, and no means of support. Before long the settled ministry began to resent the intrusion of these wandering prophets, who often disturbed their congregations. Some of them abused their office and made it an excuse for living a very comfortable life at the expense of the congregations whom they visited. The Didache (the earliest book of church administration) mentions that a wandering prophet may stay one or two days with a congregation, but if he wishes to stay three days he is a false prophet (and if) any wandering prophet in a moment of alleged inspiration demands money or a meal, he (too) is a false prophet."

No wonder, as Barclay also mentions, the office of that kind of prophet soon faded out in the church.

So, back to where we began in Ephesians 4:11, and the meaning of prophets in that verse. Is it talking about a **Paul-type prophet** revealing the unsearchable riches of Christ, or an **Agabus-type prophet** revealing immediate events happening to people and nations?

The previous chapter, Ephesians 3, provides the context, and it's clearly about Paul-type prophets, like Paul himself. Agabus-type prophets also existed, but there is no indication in Ephesians that Paul was referring to them.

In Part 2 on Prophecy we take a look at **Malachi 4:5-6** and ask: "Are there Elijah-like prophets in the church today/"