

Tough Topics: On Prophecy (Philipp's Daughters)

21:9 *Now there was to this man four virgin (unmarried) daughters prophesying.*

This verse and activity by the daughters raises questions. In what sense did they prophesy?

First, the word is a present active participle, modifying the activity of the daughters of Philipp. Since the main verb is an imperfect (past time with a present stem), the action would be concurrent (attendant circumstances) with the action of the main verb. WDTM? They were engaged in this activity, attendant to Paul's arrival and being the daughters of Philipp.

To show you the complexity, I'll give you six examples of well-known translations:

ESV He had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied.

NRSV He had four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy.

NASB Now this man had four virgin daughters who were prophetesses.

NIV He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.

KJV And the same man had four daughters, virgins, which did prophesy.

NKJV Now this man had four virgin daughters who prophesied.

I would argue, based on the grammar and context, that Luke is not simply describing what the daughters were (vocationally), but *what they were doing at the time of Paul's visit*. That is, they were prophesying while Paul was there. This does not mean that they were prophesying before, but it doesn't preclude it. But the grammar does not support a more "adjectival" rendering (see NASB translation above).

But what were they prophesying about? What does it mean to "prophesy"? The internal evidence in Acts is where we start. We go to **2:17-18**:

" 'And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.' "

This is part of Peter's sermon at Pentecost. But Peter is citing from the prophet Joel.

Joel 2:28-29: And it will be after these things also, I will pour out from My Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and *your daughters will prophesy*, and your old men will dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even upon the slaves and upon the female slaves in those days I will pour out my Spirit.

This prophecy from Joel, Peter declares, is *happening on Pentecost*. He does modify a part of the Joel citation. He changes "And after these things" to "And it will be *in these last days*..." Peter clearly sees the events happening as the commencement of the last days, that is the Day of the Lord, or the Day of Judgment.

Back to Philipp's daughters. Are they prophesying *in connection to* the inauguration of the Day of the Lord? The internal evidence would lead us to say, "yes." What we can also say (at least) is

that they were prophesying upon the arrival of Paul and his party, and I would argue, during the duration of their stay. The question then is, what is it to prophesy?

To prophesy is *to tell the truth about future event in keeping with God's Word*, or in a more generic sense, *to speak the truth of God*. The prophets of old did both; indeed there were also female prophetesses in the OT. Five of them, to be exact—

Miriam (**Exodus 15:20**; but also **Numbers 12:1-2**!)

Deborah (**Judges 4(4)-5**)

King Lemuel's mother (**Prov 31**)

Huldah (**2 Kings 22:8-20**)

Isaiah's wife (**Is 8:3**)

These women in general showed leadership (in the absence of men in the case of Deborah) and spoke God's truth to others. In one case (Huldah), a prophetess predicts the future and what the Lord says about it. In another case, Isaiah's wife is described as a "prophetess" but we don't know anything else. King Lemuel's mother was said to have "an oracle" which is a way prophets received God's word, and she speaks a prophesy about her son.

These "prophetesses" spoke God's truth in various ways. Two of them were seen in their vocations of wife and mother. Note well...there were also "false prophets/prophetesses."

What we can say also is that they were a rare occurrence but did exist and do the work of the Lord. They were to speak God's word and put it into action.

In the NT (**Luke 2:36-38**), we have a prophetess in the Temple named Anna. In her case, we're told that she was waiting for the redemption of Israel and spoke of the coming of Jesus to all who were around.

What Does Jesus Tell Us About Prophecy?

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days *he has spoken to us by his Son*, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. (**Hebrews 1:1-2**)

Before we talk about NT prophets and prophecy, we must consider what Jesus says about the subject. In Matthew, Jesus talks about prophets with respect to John the Baptist: As they went away, Jesus speaks to the crowds concerning him:

What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you." Truly, I say to you, *among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist*. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven *is greater than he*. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it

by force. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied *until John*, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. (**Matt 11:7b-15**)

As Jesus says, there is a clear culmination of messianic prophecy with John. He is the “greatest born of women” and the Law and Prophets prophesied until him. But Jesus also says that the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is “greater than he.” So, with the coming of John, then Jesus, there is a fulfillment and *a change*.

John the Baptist himself speaks to this in John’s Gospel.

And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.” And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “*Are you the Prophet?*” And he answered, “*No.*” So they said to him, “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.” (**John 1:19-23**)

We see with the subject of prophecy the figure of Elijah referenced. Jesus says more about this coming down the Mount of Transfiguration:

And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, “Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.” And the disciples asked him, “Then why do the scribes say *that first Elijah must come?*” He answered, “Elijah does come, and he will restore all things. But I tell you that Elijah *has already come*, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands.” Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist. (**Matt 17:9-13**)

This talk about “Elijah” is a direct reference to **Malachi 4:5-6**:

Behold, *I will send you Elijah the prophet* before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”

So, with the “great and awesome day of the Lord,” we have the “prophet Elijah” who comes. This is John the Baptist, who prepares the way for the Lord. In this, all OT prophecy finds its fulfillment. Lord Jesus Christ is *the center and culmination of all prophecy*. He is the prophet from among the brothers of Moses (**Deut 18:18**). With the coming of Jesus, Who is the Word, the Son, The Prophet, the King, the Lamb of God...all prophecy comes *to an end*.

What, then, of NT prophecy? Whatever it is, *it is always about Jesus*. **End=goal**.

We can see in Acts *narrow* prophecy and broader, more *general* prophecy. Narrow prophecy may be a foretelling of a particular event fixing to happen. General prophecy is about the broad proclamation of Christ. Even narrowly, prophecy is about God’s will with respect to the Body of

Jesus, the Church. The daughters of Philipp had the gift of prophesy *to warn Paul about what was fixin' to happen*. But this wasn't disconnected from God's Word and Son. Any prophecy in the new age, narrow or broad, must be centered on Jesus Christ, His proclamation and Kingdom.

What Does St. Paul Say About Prophecy?

Now to Paul. We have three key places in the same letter, 1 Corinthians. The first is **1 Cor 11:2-5**. For our purpose, we see that women and men are to “pray and prophesy” in appropriate manner to their role within the order of creation.

Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you. But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, *but every wife who prays or prophesies* with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven. (**1 Cor 11:2-5**)

So, women do prophesy in some sense. In chapter 12, Paul says that there are a variety of gifts and activities from the Spirit, including prophecy:

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, *to another prophecy*, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are empowered *by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills*. (**1 Cor 12:7-11**)

A little later, Paul says prophesying is good, and he desires that the Corinthians earnestly desire the “spiritual gifts (charisms),” especially that you may “prophesy.” Also note, that the gifts of healing and miracles would indicate that these gifts, in some sense, are *non-normative* and *done in the Apostolic Age*. But the gifts are always *to build up and cause unity*. In **14:3ff**, he says:

On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up. (**1 Cor 14:3-5**)

Paul gives stipulations for prophesying rightly and orderly in worship...but goes onto say that the women should “keep silent in the churches” and are not “permitted to speak.” (see **1 Cor 14:34-35**) So, there is *a caveat*. Women (within their vocations) are able to prophesy but not over against men (their “heads”). We might see the daughters of Philipp as prophesying *within his household*, and according to what Paul teaches in his epistles.

Paul also says that there is a prophetic *office*. Hear this from Ephesians:

And he gave the apostles, *the prophets*, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. (Eph 4:11-14)

So, what are to make of all of this? On one hand, there will come a day when “daughters will prophesy.” Peter says that this day is now—the age of the Church, brought about by the outpouring of the Spirit. This is eschatological prophesying—declaring that God has visited His people in time and space and inaugurated the last days *in Christ*. Messianic prophetic fulfillment. *All flesh* may be able to do this as a sign of the inauguration of the End Times.

There is a sense that prophesying in general is in keeping with what we see women do in the OT, and all Christians are to do—*speak God’s truth within their various callings*. Paul often speaks of prophesying in a *worship context*. But not all people prophesy. Prophesying then seems to have a direct revelation from God, then to articulate that “word” to others “to build up the body.” Men and women are to fully participate in the Divine Service, and give their voices to God’s Word and truth. But were some women “prophets”? It seems so. Perhaps under the direct influence of the Spirit. The Spirit in Acts is way more “immediate” than He appears today. For the Church has the regular “means of grace,” dispensing the Spirit through these “mediations.”

One also wonders...with the writing and codification of the New Testament, and the closing of the canon of Holy Scripture, that to prophesy in the way we see in Acts and Paul is no longer necessary AND normative because we have God’s fully revelatory Word and the Sacraments.

But women were not, are *not* to be pastors—they are prohibited from teaching (1 Tim 2:12) and are to “exercising authority” over man. That is, they are not to usurp the duties of the pastoral office and act in accord with the created order between men and women. There seems to be a difference in “prophesying” and “teaching.” As well, just because someone prophesies, does not make them an apostle or a pastor (teacher/steward of the mysteries). It is a unique gift, and *the words spoken must be tested*. Another way to situate this teaching...women who “prophesied” in the NT era always did so *within their ordained, vocational office*. Never as pastors.

So, what are the daughters of Philipp doing? They are, upon Paul’s arrival, *given over to speak about what is fixing to happen to him*. Prophesying in this context is to warn Paul the way Agabus (the prophet) warns him. They are speaking a prophetic truth—what indeed will happen to Paul when he goes to Jerusalem. I believe this to be a non-normative event. But this word is something Paul already knows. In fact, their “prophesying” is akin to Miriam, who rebukes Moses for having a Midianite wife. God rebukes both Aaron and Miriam (who claim to have a word from the Lord) by saying that Moses is a *different* sort of prophet—He speaks to him “face to face.” This very much is how Paul is characterized in the book of Acts. Christ confronts him directly, and we have several indications throughout Acts and Paul’s letters that Jesus speaks to Paul in a way different from other “prophets.” See also 2 Cor 14:1-4.

We should see Philipp's daughters as an instantiation of the prophet Joel, that the Spirit is indeed poured out on "all flesh," but also that Paul is *a very unique, plenipotentiary ambassador for Christ*. Paul is called apostle directly by Jesus Christ, and his office gives him a greater knowledge of his mission and purpose. Utterly unique, even in the age of the apostles.

Women have always had the duty to speak the truth of the gospel and God's revealed Word. Joel's prophecy, or Philipp's daughters, does not undo biblical headship and undermine the pastoral office. Indeed, this is not a "proof text" to show that Philipp's daughters were occupying a pastoral office, or an endorsement for women to function as pastors. Nor does this mean that anyone, man or woman, who claim to have a "word from the Spirit" are to be trusted without first testing that word. Prophets are not self-appointed, but are verified by truth.

Testing the Prophetic Word

At the conclusion, then, we shift from what Philipp's daughters might have been doing, and what the Bible says about testing any word from someone claiming to be a prophet.

Rejoice in all things; Pray constantly; Give thanks in every circumstance, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you; Do not quench the Spirit. *Do not despise prophecies*, but *test everything*; hold fast what is good. (1 Thess 5:16-21)

Paul, at the end of one of his first letters, gives concrete, specific advice to the believers at Thessalonica. There are three commands that must be held in tension (so, they are not cancelling each other out), to be taken seriously.

1. **Do not quench the Spirit**—this sounds like a provocative statement, and it is, but not in the way we might tend to take it. We cannot extinguish the Spirit or His work...but we can drive away the Spirit through works of darkness and apathy against God's Word. Through ongoing, unrepentant sin. This is likely what Paul means here—*do not do things that would cause the Spirit to depart from you*. Do not participate in works of darkness.

2. **Do not disdain prophecies**—again, provocative. This is to treat prophecy as having no value or worth. But again, what is prophecy in the Age of Christ? It is a spiritual gift centered on the proclamation of Jesus Christ. But...

3. **Test all things**—this is to put something under critical examination. This is what a Christian is to do, for instance, in themselves before having the Eucharist. This is to test something for its genuineness. It's real and good and *for me*...am I receiving it faithfully and in a worthy manner?

4. **Hold fast to the good**—once something is tested, we then are to "hold fast" to it. This can refer to a tradition that had been handed down (1 Cor 11:2), a faithful confession (Heb 10:23), and to the Word (Luke 8:15; 1 Cor 15:2). That is what is good—Christ, His Word, His Sacrament...and the hope that comes from those good things. Adhere to them for dear life.

The final prohibition Paul gives at the conclusion to this "list" is **keep away from every from of evil**. This is the context of receiving a Spirit-filled prophetic Word. Reject what is evil and holding fast to what is good. We are not to disdain prophecies, but test them and hold fast to that which is in accord with God's Word and truth (reality). Listen to St. John, who has a similar admonition. Instead of prophecy, he speaks of spirits (which would include charisms):

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but *test the spirits* to see whether they are from God, for many *false prophets* have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already. Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error. (1 John 4:1-6)

The “Problem” of Modern-Day Prophecy

So, if anyone claims to have a word of prophesy, or a direct revelation from the Holy Spirit, we are to test that against God’s fully authoritative written Word, something that the 1st century Church did not have until much later in the century. They also had the apostles. So, their times were unique and the Spirit may have worked in different ways, in more “open” ways. Can the Spirit work this way today? Of course! Does He...well, it’s hard to say. We never “limit the Spirit’s “capability.” But whatever the Spirit says through the mouth of so-called “prophet,” God has given us the means, the Sword of the Spirit, to test that word.

The modern American tends to privilege the experiential/anecdotal over the objective reality!

Is There Still Prophecy Yet to Be Fulfilled?

Yes. While Jesus brought to completion all prophecy *in Himself*, there are *the final things* to come. We might say He is the inaugurator of those final things. All things have been fulfilled *in principle*. While we live in the “end times,” and have been given the Spirit as a “downpayment,” there will be a full end. In a sense, Jesus came “before the time,” (see **Matt 8:29**) but will come again in the resurrection of the just and the unjust. The classic, Lutheran aphorism to express this is *the Now, and the Not Yet*. We live in the Now times, where Jesus has done all things to restore this creation in Himself, and won the forgiveness of sins for all who believe in Him. There is a time to come, a final judgment, a final Day of the Lord, where all things are brought to completion without remainder.

God warned His people about the problem of false prophets. Jesus does the same. In fact, He says in the last days (so now) there will be many false prophets and false-christs who will come among the Church (**Matt 24:24**). God’s warning to the Israelites is still apt for us:

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, ‘Let us go after other gods,’ which you have not known, ‘and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. *For the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.* You shall walk after the Lord your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him. But that prophet or that

dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of slavery, to make you leave the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst. (**Deut 13:1-5**)

Very often, people who claim to have prophetic insight or a direct revelation from God come from circles that *reject the Sacrament of the Altar, the Eucharist*. In the time of Luther, there were people claiming to have an internal revelation, or a prompting of the Spirit. He called them “enthusiasts.” What these people may be seeking is an intimate connection to God’s Word, God’s Spirit that is *experiential* and *personal*. We have that in the Supper! We participate in the heavenly reality in the true body and blood of Jesus, and receive the forgiveness of sins...personally. But when you deny that reality, you will be tempted to look for these heavenly realities in every corner. The irony is that God gives it directly to us through the means of grace.

Final observation. Even if someone has “the gift of prophecy,” we are still commanded to test it. So, we end up in the same place. God’s Word. As for modern day prophets, we might say that anyone who is able to articulate God’s truth from God’s word and apply it to people’s lives is a prophet, or has a “prophetic gift.” But we still are to test that Word. So, the question isn’t whether there are prophets or prophesy today...but whether God’s people study and deeply engage with the Word of God and obey all that God commands