

When the Kingdom Comes With Power

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Spiritual Gifts: Showing the Spirit Series

1 Corinthians 12:10

Many of you are familiar with the name St. Augustine. There was no one in the history of the Christian church from the time of the apostle Paul until Martin Luther in the 16th century that had more influence on the thinking of the church than Augustine. He was the Bishop of a church in North Africa, very learned, a very scholarly man, a brilliant philosopher and speaker, who lived during the last days of the Roman Empire at the end of the 4th and beginning of the 5th centuries.

During the early part of Augustine's ministry, he was very skeptical about miracles and the use of spiritual gifts. In fact, in the early part of Augustine's ministry, he taught that spiritual gifts had ceased to operate in the church. But in his last great writing called The City of God, Augustine printed a long list of retractions concerning his earlier writings and teachings.

One of the problems of writing books is that as you mature and gain more life experience, you often discover that a previous position that you were absolutely sure about back then is wrong. So in The City of God Augustine wrote this list of retractions and one of the things that he changed his mind about is the continuing activity of the Holy Spirit in the church. He came to believe after numerous experiences of healings, miracles, and prophecies that God never withdrew these things from the church, but intended spiritual gifts to continue throughout the entire church age until the Lord returns. Augustine wrote:

We cannot listen to those who maintain that the invisible God works no visible miracles...God, who made visible heaven and earth, does not disdain to work visible miracles in heaven or earth, that he may thereby awaken the soul which is immersed in things visible to worship him, the invisible.

In other words, one of the ways that the invisible God manifests himself in this world and shows himself to be real is through the miraculous. Augustine gave several examples of sudden, very dramatic healings that took place in his church. One involved a brother and sister named Paulus and Palladia, who were widely known in the city because of their horrible cases of palsy. They wandered into Augustine's church one Easter morning where the largest crowd of the year gathered. They were both shaking horribly from their palsy. Paulus was praying when suddenly the Spirit of God came on him and his shaking completely stopped.

Those around him recognized what had happened and soon the whole church was filled with the voices of people shouting praises to God. Augustine began explaining in very eloquent terms that God was at work in their midst. And in the middle of the service there were even more shouts because the palsied sister, Palladia, who had been trembling at the back of the church, suddenly found herself to be healed. At this point, Augustine recorded,

Such a shout of wonder rose from men and women together, that their exclamations and tears seemed never to come to an end...they shouted God's praises without words but with such a noise that our ears could scarcely bear it.

What was going on in Augustine's church? What is going on in our church every time we experience a healing, or a true word of prophecy? What is going on in churches around the world that report dramatic instantaneous healings? And even more importantly, what was going on in the New Testament in which we read of an explosion of healings, miracles, and prophecies?

To me, the great blessing of a healing, or a true word of prophecy, or a miracle is not only in its immediate impact upon an individual, or a group who gets to witness it, but the great beauty of these things lies in the fact that they are sign posts pointing to the in-breaking of God's dynamic reign and rule in Christ. Prophecies, healings, and miracles are signs of the in-breaking of the coming kingdom of God.

We've all sat through movie previews where they say: Now, here's a preview of coming attractions. In the movie preview, you get to see some of the highlights of a movie that is coming out in a few months. Sometimes I sit there and think to myself: I would never want to go to that movie, but there are other times where I think: That looks like a really great movie! I want to see that.

Healing, a miracle, or a true prophetic word is a preview of the coming kingdom of God. God is giving us a little snippet of what life is going to be like when the kingdom of God fully comes at the return of Jesus Christ. Whenever people truly forgive and they lay down their bitterness, their hurt, and there is true reconciliation between two individuals, that is a sign, a pointer to the coming kingdom which is going to be a kingdom characterized by forgiveness and reconciliation.

Whenever you see diverse races coming together – blacks and whites treating one another as brothers and sisters, members together of God's family that is a preview of a coming attraction. Because when the kingdom comes in its fullness, it is going to break down all racial divisions, all prejudices. When you see hungry people being fed in the name of Jesus Christ, well-drilling projects being carried out in the name of Jesus Christ, medicine being offered in the name of Jesus Christ, when you see the poor being ministered to, women and children being released from the sex slave trade, that is a preview of the coming kingdom of God when justice will be worked for the oppressed.

And certainly, every time a person is miraculously healed, we are given a foretaste of the wholeness of what will be ours as we feed from the leaves of the Tree of Life in heaven. Every time God intervenes in nature to multiply loaves or to calm storms, we are being given a hint of paradise regained. The kingdom of God coming in power. Every time someone is raised from the dead, we are seeing a preview of the coming attraction in which there will be a final resurrection of all the dead in Christ - over all the centuries, all the babies, all the little ones, all the persecuted.

Every time we hear a prophecy we are getting a preview of the coming kingdom when we will hear the voice of God personally addressing us and we will see him face to face.

Today, as we continue in this series on Spiritual Gifts, I'm going to link the two gifts of miracles and prophecy to the coming kingdom. I've called today's talk, "When the Kingdom Comes With Power." Let's pray.

^{1Co 12:8} To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit,

^{1Co 12:9} to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit,

^{1Co 12:10} to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues,¹ and to still another the interpretation of tongues.²

^{1Co 12:11} All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.

In verse 10, the apostle Paul speaks to us about miraculous powers and prophecy.

^{1Co 12:10} to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues,¹ and to still another the interpretation of tongues.²

The word "miracle" is used very cheaply today, particularly on late-night infomercials that sell stain removers or some body grooming product. So we have:

- The Miracle Callous Razor designed to remove corns and calluses from your feet.
- The Miracle Foot File to remove rough skin from your feet.
- The Miracle Stone to remove dry skin from your feet.
- The Miracle Foot Scrub, which is a gentle exfoliate for your feet.

Apparently, marketers believe that people's feet in America require miraculous intervention. Maybe it is because of the silly shoes we wear, I don't know. But there are also miracle cleaning products like:

- Nature's Miracle Mess Cleanup

- Nature's Miracle Skunk Remover
- Nature's Miracle Litter Treatment
- There are miracle groomers for horses

We need a miracle to get rid of the smell of animals.

- Miracle Mops
- Miracle Laundry Balls

And, of course, there are lots of food products with the word “miracle” in them. Most famously, Miracle Whip – no one in their right mind would eat a produce like Spam without a miracle!

My favorite, though, is Miracle Muffin Mix. Maybe you've tried these? Here is the ad: “The people at Miracle Muffins have created a new way to incorporate more fiber and protein into your Vegan diet. These healthy muffins contain no flour, no sugar, no butter or oil while providing you 8 grams of fiber per muffin.”

If there is no flour, no sugar, no butter or oil, and yet there are 8 grams of fiber, what distinguishes this so-called muffin from a piece of wood?

The word “miracle” is a really unfortunate choice of words by the translators of the New International Version of the Bible. The reason I say it is unfortunate is because within our contemporary worldview, a miracle is often understood as some invasion from another world, like from outer-space. To give a truly biblical understanding of miracles, we have to look at the words the Bible uses. One of the words is:

Paradoxa

From which we get the English word “paradox.” It means something happening that we would not normally expect to happen. We are not talking about an invasion from outside, but something within the natural order that we wouldn't have anticipated. The word used here in 1 Cor. 12 is the word:

Dunameis

Dunameis means a display of power or authority. Another word that is used is:

Semeia

Semeia means a sign. So, from these three words – paradoxa, dunameis, and semeia, here is what we would come up with as a definition of a so-called miracle. What a miracle is, in biblical terms, is

Miracle = Something that's happened which is utterly unanticipated by us, and which provides a sign to us of the presence of a powerful authority at work in our midst.

There is an utterly unanticipated authority and power at work and this activity is a sign to the coming kingdom of God. The result of this unanticipated power and sign post to the kingdom is wonder and awe. That's why miracles in the Bible are often referred to as Signs and Wonders. The signs of the kingdom provoke wonder and awe in us.

Now, why does God work miracles in our midst? Why does he occasionally give the gift of miracles today? One reason is that they are previews of the coming attraction which is the New Creation. The universe is not headed towards everyone floating around as disembodied souls in some spiritual heaven. Everything is going towards a New Creation. Sin is going to be removed from the Old Creation and we are going to forever live in resurrected bodies on a New Earth. So when we read in the Bible about the stilling of storms, or the desert feedings, or incredible healings, they point ahead to the New Creation when there will be no hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis, and no one hungry, sick or in need.

We see in resurrection miracles, you know, the raising of the dead, we see in nature, miracles like the stilling of storms or the multiplication of food, when we see healing miracles, they are all signs that the kingdom has come in Jesus and is coming in its fullness.

There is still another kind of miracle that some of you have experienced in your life. That is God's miraculous protection from harm. In the Bible there is a whole variety of miracles described, but one of the kinds of miracles that I think we sometimes overlook is God's protecting miracles. In an utterly unanticipated way God manifests his power so that we are saved from harm in a most unusual way. Soldiers sometimes have stories which they will share in private because they are afraid someone will think they are crazy, of seeing angels, of unusual guidance past harm. Let me share with you a story of God's protecting miracles.

This story took place during WWII in Japan. There was a woman named Mutsuko Hasegawa. Her husband was killed during the war leaving Mutsuko behind with three little girls. Mutsuko had become a Christian as a child. She told God as a child that she was willing to serve him as a missionary, but on the day that she received official notice of her husband's death, Mutsuko became so despondent and saw so little hope for her future that she took her three girls to a bridge in her home city of Hiroshima where she decided that she was going to jump holding the hands of her three daughters.

By God's grace, he intervened in her life and spoke to her. He said to Mutsuko, "Have you not given your life to me? Have I ever let you down? Can I not provide what was needed to feed not only you, but your three children?" And then God spoke very plainly

to her and said, “Entrust your children to me. One day they are going to be missionaries and they are going to go where you couldn’t go and do what you couldn’t do.” In tears, Mutsuko repented of her decision to kill herself and of her selfishness. She committed her little children into God’s hands.

I wonder, friends, if there are any of you God ever prevented from committing suicide. Is there anyone here who would say, “You know, there was a time in my life where I got so low that I actually contemplated taking my own life, but God intervened.”

This wasn’t the last crisis for this family. Although Mutsuko found needed employment at a downtown hospital, it seemed that God was telling her to quit her job, leave Hiroshima, and flee to the mountains. She kept these thoughts to herself at first, but then she felt compelled to share them with her relatives. They laughed at her. They said it was ridiculous to leave Hiroshima. The city was of little strategic military importance. It had been spared bombing so far and she should continue to work at the hospital to support her family. Mutsuko followed her family’s advice, but one day the voice she heard was louder and more urgent: “You need to leave. You need to leave now. You need to flee.” This time, without notifying anyone, she fled with her children. The atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima the next day.

Mutsuko’s daughter did grow up to be one of the leading missionaries in Japan. Along with her husband, she became a church planter. Her husband was elected the chairman of the Evangelical Fellowship of Asia. Her husband is held in high esteem in Japan as one of the leaders of the Japanese evangelical movement. If you or one of your loved ones is facing some danger; you have a loved one in the military forces, pray for God’s protecting miracles.

The Bible tells us to expect the miraculous. Jesus says in John 14.12,

Jn 14:12 Very truly I tell you, all who have faith in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.

Unfortunately, the NIV obscures the clarity of what Jesus is promising here. He is not talking about greater things. Rather, Jesus says,

Jn 14:12 Very truly I tell you, all who have faith in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater WORKS than these, because I am going to the Father.

John’s consistent use of the word “works” concerns the miraculous. Jesus is clearly promising that his followers will see even greater miracles than the ones he performed. Now, that’s a promise that has stretched every Christian who has ever read the gospel of John, bthere is something about an atmosphere of faith and risk that ought to

characterize churches today. The church sees very few miracles, at least in the Western world, because the church exercises very little faith and is engaged in very little risk. Churches in China, in African and in South America report many, many stories of miracles. There is something about an open expectancy to God and a willingness to step out in risk that seems to provide the soil for seeing the miraculous.

And so, as I said last week, we need to pray in the church for gifts of faith to be given to leaders, to pastors, to missionaries, and gifts of faith to be given to us. God wants to do the miraculous today.

Let me close this section by quoting from one of the world's foremost church historians of the last generation. His name was Jaroslav Pelikan. He taught history and religious studies at Yale. Here is what Professor Pelikan said:

The history of the church has never been altogether without the spontaneous gifts of the Holy Spirit. From the first century to the 20th, from Antioch to Asuza Street, the accounts have been gathered and preserved to challenge the skepticism of unbelievers and to build the faith of believers. In the light of such overwhelming evidence, the Church today can look to the past with gratitude for what God has done, to the present with faith in his still-awesome power, and to the future with hope for the great miracles he will yet accomplish.

Can we expect miracles today? The answer is resoundingly, yes!

But there is still another sign of the in-breaking kingdom, still another gift that is a preview of coming attractions. That is the gift of prophecy. Prophecy is simply what happens when a person speaks for God under the immediate inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Prophecy is based on spontaneous revelation. Prophecy is not preaching a sermon; the mark of prophecy is spontaneity. There is an immediacy to the message. In some places people have been taught that what is spoken about by prophecy in 1 Cor. 12 or 14 is what might be called expository preaching, the kind of thing I do here on Saturday evening, or Sunday morning.

But that is not what Paul means, or what the Bible means by prophecy. What I do on Saturday night, or Sunday morning is deliver a prepared message that is the result of my study and prayer. There may occasionally be an immediacy of revelation where I deliver something that was either not prepared, or that came by way of some Holy Spirit inspiration, but that is not the bulk of what I share with you. Prophecy is not preaching and preaching is not prophecy. The apostle Paul distinguishes between prophets and preachers on a number of occasions. For example, in 1 Cor. 12:28 Paul says:

^{1Co 12:28} And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues.

And in Ephesians 4.11-12, the apostle Paul says:

Eph 4:11 So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the
pastors and teachers,
Eph 4:12 to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be
built up

Prophecy is based on an immediate and spontaneous revelation from God. It is from that basis that a person speaks. Prophecy doesn't come from one's own mind, or your own wishes or flesh. It doesn't come from one's own study. It doesn't come from message preparation. True prophecy comes from the Holy Spirit.

Now, it was understood that in the 400 years before Jesus came that while prophecy never entirely ceased from Israel, it was at a low ebb. There has never been a period of time where God stopped speaking to his people. But in the four centuries before Jesus came, the light of prophecy dimmed in Israel. In fact, the popular opinion was that the voice of prophecy had been stilled. The Jewish Talmud illustrates this opinion saying:

When Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, the latter prophets were dead, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel.

And the historian, Josephus, who lived just a few years after Jesus also said that

The prophetic voice left Israel four or five centuries ago.

What is remarkable about the New Testament is that it is birthed in a blaze of prophecy. From prophecy being this very dim light, suddenly there is this giant bonfire, this forest fire of the prophetic. Just read the opening chapters of the gospel of Luke. Everywhere and in multiple ways people are hearing from God and speaking. John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, received angelic messages, Mary's cousin, Elizabeth, is prophesying to Mary, the Virgin Mary herself is prophesying. We read of John the Baptist's father in Luke 1.67,

Lk 1:67 His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

And then there is the elder Simeon, who when he saw the Baby Jesus being presented in the Temple for his circumcision, prophesied saying in Luke 2.28-29

Lk 2:28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

Lk 2:29 "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss³ your servant
in peace.

Lk 2:30 For my eyes have seen your salvation,
Lk 2:31 which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
Lk 2:32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.”

And we read in Luke 2.36-38 these words:

Lk 2:36 There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage,
Lk 2:37 and then had been a widow for eighty-four years. ⁴ She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.
Lk 2:38 Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

Prophecy is God shouting to us: The kingdom has come! The kingdom has broken in. Prophecy is a preview of coming attractions. The pouring out of the Holy Spirit and prophetic activity is always a sign of the in-breaking kingdom.

I want you to turn to Acts 2.16-18.

Ac 2:16 No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

Ac 2:17 “ ‘In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.

Ac 2:18 Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.

If you have a Bible, I would like you to circle the word “all.” Whenever the Holy Spirit is poured out, the result is that people without distinction of sex, class, or age, are able to prophesy. All who receive the Spirit are able to prophesy. Not all of you are prophets. Not all of us will have a ministry of prophesying where we are regularly getting spontaneous revelations from God and are speaking under the immediate inspiration of the Spirit. But friend, from time to time, if you are a follower of Christ, God is going to speak to you by his Holy Spirit a word, a message, that he wants you to share with someone else. That word may come from a dream God gives you, or a clear picture, or strong impression, as you pray. The word may occasionally come from a vision or even a strong underlining of a verse of scripture. God may highlight a scripture passage and say that you need to share that with so-and-so. All includes you, and all includes me.

Now, how do we know when someone claims to speak for God whether we should be open to their message or not. Well, the test is not how oddly someone changes their voice. This is not the test of a prophet. Speaking in King James English, “Thus sayeth the

Lord of Hosts” is not the test of prophecy. Volume is not the test of prophecy. Being difficult, being over-sensitive, being super-spiritual, or spiritually stuck-up – none of these things are tests of prophecy.

What are the marks of true prophecy? First of all, there is the general test of consistency. When you hear a word that someone claims is a prophecy, and it is coming to them under the immediate inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the first test you should apply to that word is the test of consistency. Is this message consistent with Holy Scripture? The God who inspired the Bible is not going to contradict himself with a word of prophecy. Is this word consistent with what the Bible teaches about God, about Christ, about sin, about judgment, about material wealth, about holiness? Is this consistent with the scriptures?

Second, is this message consistent with the Jesus you know? Does this sound like something that would come from the mouth of Jesus as he is revealed in the gospels? The same Jesus in the gospels continues to live today as the resurrected Lord. The claim that someone is speaking on behalf of our resurrected Lord, we would expect his voice to sound the way it sounded in the gospels. Is it consistent with the scriptures? Is it consistent with the Spirit of Christ?

And is the person who is delivering this prophetic word living a life of consistent followership of Christ? Is this person a disciple of Jesus? It doesn't mean that they have perfect character. But is the person basically living in submission to Christ? Is it this person's aim to serve Christ? Because I would never receive a word of prophecy from someone whose life is completely at odds with God and God's commandments. Someone is living an immoral life; someone is greedy; someone is consistently mishandling money; someone is mistreating their spouse or children; someone is a terrible worker and has horrible work habits; someone is a racist, we ought not to receive a word of prophecy from them. The test is the test of consistency.

And having passed the test of consistency, then I would listen to see if the purposes of prophecy are being fulfilled as this person is sharing their word. To make purposes of prophecy memorable, just remember the letter “C.” There are five purposes of prophecy in the New Testament and they all begin with the letter “c.” We read in 1 Cor. 14.3 these words:

1Co 14:3 But those who prophesy speak to people for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort.

The Bible scholar, Dr. Ellicott, put the three purposes of prophecy in 1 Cor. 14 this way:

Prophecy is designed to build up, stir up, and to cheer up.

Prophecy is designed to be constructive.

This doesn't mean that there is nothing negative in a true prophetic word. But you know, there is a difference between constructive criticism, which is designed to help a person overcome a problem, and destructive criticism which basically rakes someone over the coals but gives no hope for change. A true prophetic word holds out for people the hope of redemption if they repent and if they choose to follow God. You see this pattern over and over in the Bible. A prophet delivers a very hard word. But there is always the tag line, "but, if you repent;" "but, if you return to me;" "but, if you give up your idols, I the Lord will draw near to you. I will heal your waywardness. I will encourage you."

That's the word of prophecy for some of you today. I feel like the Holy Spirit is saying, "I have so much for you, so much blessing, but you have been unwilling to receive it. The plans I have for you are so much better than your own plans. Will you submit to my plans?" The Lord says, "I would bless your life in extraordinary ways, if only you would turn from your sin and yield yourself to me."

See, you don't have to live the life you are now living – unhappy, perhaps, addicted, repeating the same mistakes, frustrated. God has so much more for you, if you submit to him.

Prophecy is constructive. It is designed to build up hope. It is designed to build up faith. When listening for true prophecy, you should always check to see if there is a note of redemptive hope in it because God is a redeemer.

One of my very favorite verses in the entire Bible is found in 2 Samuel 14:14,

2Sa 14:14 Like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be recovered, so we must die. But that is not what God desires; rather, he devises ways so that a banished person does not remain banished from him.

That's what prophecy ought to sound like. But God is working overtime devising a way for you to return to him.

Here is a second purpose of prophecy.

Prophecy puts courage in people.

A prophetic word often sounds like "don't give up," "don't be afraid," "don't fear," "take courage," "be bold," "be strong," "keep on going," "persevere in your marriage," "persevere through this trial," "don't throw in the towel," "continue to trust in the Lord," "with God's help you can do it," "you can overcome that temptation," "you can overcome that besetting sin."

We frequently need courage put back into us. That's what prophecy does. It says, "Strengthen your hand. Don't run away from that confrontation. Don't be afraid of your boss, or that person in your family. God is with you."

There's a wonderful scriptural example of the prophetic purpose of encouragement in the Old Testament book of Haggai. The Jews had returned to Israel after their captivity in Babylon. In the year 538 BC, Jews had begun to rebuild their most holy place, their beloved Temple, after the Babylonians had destroyed it. In 538 BC, they began to rebuild it.

But then there was opposition from surrounding nations and other priorities began pressing in on them. They had children to take care of. They had fields to plant. They had businesses to attend to. They had their own houses to build, so the Jews stopped working on the Temple from 538 BC to 520 BC – 18 years. They laid the foundation and that was it. They walked away from the Temple.

The prophet Haggai comes along and with his prophetic gift and encourages the Jewish people to continue the work even in the face of opposition and in the face of competing priorities. And Haggai's prophecy is, to me, the classic example of the prophetic word of encouragement. It is a very short prophecy that we read in Haggai 1:13 – *Then Haggai, the Lord's messenger, gave this message of the Lord to the people, "I am with you," declares the Lord.* We read that the people immediately began to rebuild the temple!

How would those four simple words be encouragement to someone? "I am with you," declares the Lord. Apply these four words to your own life. You are going in for an operation and it's a very risky bit of surgery, or you are facing cancer. You are naturally afraid. A Christian friend comes in to pray for you and says, "I feel like I have a word from the Lord."

You say, "Really, what is it?"

"I am with you, declares the Lord." It would be an encouragement to know that the Lord was with you in the operating room.

You are about to start a new ministry, or you are venturing out in world missions. You've taken a major financial cut in salary to start this new ministry. It's a risk for you and it's a risk for your family. Do you think it would be an encouragement if somebody came and said, "I feel like I have a prophetic word for you. The word is 'I am with you, declares the Lord.'"

Or it's your wedding day and you are about to commit your life to another person for better or worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and health, until death. You are standing on the edge of the cliff wondering if you ought to leap off. Your heart is pounding. Do

you think it might be an encouragement before you exchange vows to hear a prophetic word that said to you, "I am with you, declares the Lord."

Let me ask you a personal question. Are you at a point in your life where it would be really helpful today, this week, to hear the Lord say to you "I am with you"?

Here is a third purpose.

Prophecy brings comfort to hurting people.

You may be at a point in your life where you feel that God has forgotten you, that you've been abandoned by the Lord. You've cried out to God for a breakthrough in your marriage or a breakthrough regarding the health of a loved one or your own health, a breakthrough in finances, a turn around in the life of your child who has walked away from the Lord, and you are getting no answer from God. There is no breakthrough. Every follower of Christ goes through a period of time where it feels like God has forgotten them. Even our Lord Jesus Christ, when he hung on the cross, cried out to the Father, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The feeling of being forgotten and forsaken is a very common one for followers of Christ. In those moments of feeling forsaken, God often inspires a prophetic word of comfort through the gift of prophecy. God lets you know that he hasn't forgotten you, that he sees you, and that he's aware of your situation. The situation may not change, but just knowing that God sees you fills your heart with comfort.

Some time ago I was ministering in a very small church in Florida. There were about 35 people there on Sunday morning. At the end of the message we had ministry time. I didn't know any of the people in the church, but I felt like the Lord said, "Tell Roseanne that I see her and I love her." I looked out on this group – there were maybe 15-20 women in the congregation. I said, "Is there a Roseanne here?" This woman looked up; she had that deer-caught-in-the-headlights look – she said, "Here." People turned and looked at her.

I said, "I felt that the Lord wanted to say to you that he sees you and that he loves you." She immediately dissolved into tears. She came up after the service and said, "You know, Roseanne is my given name. Everyone in this church knows me by my middle name, which is Cindy. God has spoken to me two other times when I reached a really low point. And each previous time God has spoken to me, he has used my given name Roseanne, and he said the same thing to me. I see you and I love you."

Are you in a situation where someone needs comfort? You are visiting someone in a funeral home. Someone has just gone through a breakup. A friend didn't get the job they desperately wanted. A family member is going through a divorce. Pray for the gift of prophecy.

This leads to the fourth purpose of prophecy,

Prophecy confronts people with God's reality.

But you know God is not just concerned with healing our hearts. He is also concerned about cleansing us from sin. There's another purpose for the gift of prophecy and that is to bring conviction. Look with me down to verses 24-25 of 1 Corinthians 14. We read,

But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all.

Paul is using language from the courtroom. The word "convinced" in the New International Version translation is probably better translated "convicted." It has to do with presenting evidence so that you are driven to the conclusion that an argument is correct. Here "judged" literally means to be "examined," that you are put through a course of questioning or even cross-examination by a judge in a courtroom. It goes on to say,

And the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!"

As I said, God is not only interested in healing or bringing comfort to our hearts; he also wants to cleanse us from sin. One of the ways that God challenges sin in our lives is by disclosing our secrets through the gift of prophecy. That's not the gift of word of knowledge. It is the gift of prophecy. You are sitting there, you have your church face on, and someone comes up to you and says, "How are you doing?" You say, "Oh, fine, praise the Lord. Isn't God good?" And the person responds, "Yes, God is good. In fact, he's so good that he wants to set you free from your habitual practice of embezzling money from the school that you work for." Or he's so good, he wants to set you free from your addiction to internet porn, or from your abuse of your spouse, or the guilt over the abortion you had.

What do you think would happen if the gift of prophecy was stirred up in such a way that it was regularly the case in a small group meeting, or in personal prayer ministry, that your hidden sins might be disclosed to another person? What would your attitude be toward God, towards the church, if at any moment you thought that God might pull the covers off of you and bring to light things you've hidden in darkness? Things you have locked away in some closet or pushed into the basement of your soul where no one could see those things? Things about your marriage? Things about your fears? Things about your finances and business practices and lusts. Don't you think there would be an increased level of a healthy fear of God in our midst? Don't you think there would be an increased level of holiness in the church?

I know I would spend some time repenting before I got prayer. I would make sure that everything between me and God was confessed and taken to the cross. You desire holiness in the church. Pray that the gift of prophecy would be stirred up.

The prophetic purpose of conviction is wonderfully illustrated in the life of the Old Testament King David. David had an adulterous affair with his neighbor, Bathsheba. She became pregnant as a result of their adultery. David tried to hide his sins by having Bathsheba's husband murdered. He thought he had covered his tracks. He thought he was safe. He thought he had taken care of everything. He's fooled everyone, except God, who sees everything. There's one person, friend, you can never fool, and that's God. And so God sends a prophet to David to let him know that the Judge of the universe has seen him.

You know, the prophetic gift of conviction and confrontation is an act of God's mercy and kindness. Better that your sin would be brought to the light now than that it be covered up and then brought to the light on the Day of Judgment. Better that your sin be exposed now, than later on when Jesus says every secret will be disclosed and every hidden thing will be shouted from the housetops.

Let me share with you a story of how prophecy confronted a man with God's reality. You know, it is unfortunate, even in Vineyard churches, how often prophecy is divorced from evangelism. We talk a lot about the prophetic in some circles, but it is very introspective and it really only involves the church, getting words in our small group settings, getting words in women's groups, getting words in church on Sunday morning. But then there are those who are outward focused and evangelistic. Throughout the New Testament, we see people breaking down walls of resistance through prophetic words that pierce the hearts of non-believers. Let me tell you a few stories.

Occasionally, if you ask, God may give you prophetic insight that can significantly advance the preaching of the gospel in someone's life. I remember a number of years ago having coffee with a gay man, who was totally hostile. I tried to talk with him and engage him and be kind, but he was absolutely walled off. He was really well-defended against God and he was really well-defended against pastors. So all of my attempts to engage him were met with utter defensiveness.

At a certain point in the conversation, he began talking with someone else. And so I remember actually just putting my head down at the table praying, "Lord, show me something that will reach under his defenses." And I immediately got a picture of this man holding a burning coal in his hand. He was squeezing this burning coal so tight that it was burning through his hand. And the Lord said, "The coal is unforgiveness towards his mother."

We talked for a while after I received this impression and I asked him, “May I share with you a picture that I felt the Lord gave me about you?”

He said, “Go ahead.”

As I described this burning coal and the impression that I had regarding unforgiveness, he put his head down and began to cry. Apparently, he had received a very similar picture of his life not too long before.

You know, God will often give prophetic words to unbelievers. He will give dreams. He will give visions. This is, by the way, how the gospel is leaking into the Muslim world. Tens of thousands of Muslims are being converted through dreams and visions.

This led to a very fruitful conversation which led to the advancement of the gospel in this man’s life. Friend, there is such a thing as prophetic evangelism. God confronting an unbeliever with the reality of God that God knows things about that person that otherwise could not be known except that there is a God who sees us and loves us.

Let me share with you the last purpose of prophecy.

Prophecy confirms God’s will.

I was led from my job at OSU to become our first senior pastor through the gift of prophecy. God used prophecy to underline his will in my life. I was asking God’s direction. There were a number of things pointing to me leaving my job. In the New Testament there are a number of examples of prophecy being used to offer guidance for the sending out of missionaries, or for direction in where to plant a church. You see this in Acts 13 and 16.

Well those who are seasoned pastors, including the founder of the Vineyard movement, John Wimber, would caution people regarding relying too heavily on prophecy for guidance and decision making. See, God wants you to walk dependently upon him. God does not want you to be dependent upon a prophetically gifted person to gain his mind. Your Father in heaven wants to reveal his mind to you as you relate to him personally. The vast, vast majority of our guidance will come through our own personal meditation upon God’s Word, through our own listening prayer, and through the counsel of mature Christian believers.

Prophecy ought to underline what God is already saying to you. I call it God’s highlighter pen. I was already feeling internally pressed by the Lord to leave my job at OSU. I already had a track record of leading and teaching in the church, but I needed to know what I was internally feeling and what I was hearing from others was, in fact, God’s will for me. And so God used prophecies to put his arm around me and say, “Rich, it’s me. It’s not just your good idea, it’s me.”

Friends, let me offer you some loving, pastoral counsel here for a moment. Do not be intimidated by a prophetically gifted person, or a prophetic word that comes to you and says, “God wants you to do such and such.” I’ve met so many Christians who get intimidated by the prophetically gifted person, what Sam Storms, a college professor, calls “Prophetic Awe.” They say, “Goodness, I don’t get people’s names. I don’t hear that clearly. This person came along and delivered a word to me. I guess it must be God.”

God wants you to develop confidence in your own ability to privately hear from God for your life. Friend, you are going to be judged for what you did with your choices and with your life. You will not be able to say, “Well, Lord, the reason why I married this person, or left that job, or entered this ministry, or went to that church was because of a prophetic word.” God would say, “Why didn’t you come to me on your own? Why didn’t you spend time before me listening for my voice, meditating on my word, seeking counsel from other mature Christians?”

It is God’s desire to allow us to experience more and more of his kingdom. The invisible God wishes to make himself more visible, more manifest in this world. He does this through service and good works, as through our community center. He manifests himself through rescuing marriages from the brink of divorce. He gives us a preview of coming attractions, and he does this in power through the gifts of prophecy and miracles. Let’s pray.

When the Kingdom Comes With Power

Rich Nathan

June 17-18, 2006

Spiritual Gifts: Showing the Spirit Series

1 Corinthians 12:10

I. Miracles: A Preview Of Coming Attractions

A. What Is A Miracle?

1. The Cheapening Of The Word
2. The Biblical Meaning

B. Why Does God Give Miracles?

C. Should We Expect Miracles Today?

II. Prophecy: A Sign Of the In-Breaking Kingdom

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 - a. Prophecy Is Designed To Be Constructive
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 - c. Prophecy Brings Comfort To The Hurting
 - d. Prophecy Confronts People With God's Reality
 - e. Prophecy Confirms God's Will.