

CALLED TO PROPHECY

DEVOTIONAL READING: Joel 2:28-32

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Luke 2:36-38; Acts 1:12-14; 2:16-21; 21:8-9

TODAY'S SCRIPTURE: Luke 2:36-38; 2:16-21; 21:8-9

I. In the Temple

Luke 2:36-38

36 And there was one Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Aser: she was of a great age, and had lived with an husband seven years from her virginity;

37 And she was a widow of about fourscore and four years, which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day.

38 And she coming in that instant gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

Devout Jews honored God's concern for widows. These often were older women who had no opportunities to remarry or be employed. For them, the likelihood of having a male provider was limited, necessitating help from the community.

36a. When Jesus was eight days old, Joseph and Mary took Him to the Jerusalem temple to consecrate Him as required by Scripture (Exodus 13:2; see Luke 2:21-24). In the temple courts, the little family encountered two people who were waiting for the Messiah (Luke 2:25, 36). One was a widow named *Anna*, a Greek form of the name Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 1:20).

A prophet or a *prophetess* is someone chosen by God to speak for Him as He brings something to mind. In the Old Testament, four women are designated as being prophetesses: Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Deborah (Judges 4:4), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14), and the unnamed wife of Isaiah (Isaiah 8:3). Though their words are not recorded at length like those of Moses or Jeremiah, these women served by communicating what God revealed to them for the people to hear.

The mention of Anna's father, *Phanuel*, suggests that he was a well-remembered resident of Jerusalem. His name means "face of God," or "presence of God." This implies his religious dedication, a faithfulness that was passed down to his daughter.

The tribe of Aser (Asher; see Exodus 1:1-4) was one of the 10 northern tribes destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 BC. Though many were taken into captivity at that time, others were left behind. Some became the people known as Samaritans through intermarriage with non-Israelites. Anna's family apparently was left in the land but did not intermarry with other peoples, thus remaining recognizably as being from a tribe.

36b-37a. *Fourscore and four years* can refer either to Anna's age (84 years old) or to the approximate amount of time

she had been widowed. Either possibility means that she was old enough to remember when the Romans conquered the Jewish homeland in 63 BC.

37b. Rather than find a new spouse, Anna devoted herself to spiritual service within the temple. She fasted and prayed. Though she literally may not ever have left *the temple*, more likely the language is meant to emphasize her continual devotion to serving God.

38. Anna's words reveal that she had messianic expectations for Jesus (compare Luke 2:30-32). Recognizing redemption to be at hand was a fulfillment of prophecy (Isaiah 52:9). However, what is meant precisely by *redemption in Jerusalem* is not clear. Anna could, like many others, have national politics in mind: redemption would mean that Judea, like Israel of old, would be its own sovereign nation again.

That would have had special appeal because Anna was old enough to remember when Rome became the official power in Judea. Memories of life before Rome were enticing, even if those times were less than peaceful. Or she could have the more spiritual redemption from sins in mind.

God sees fit to use whatever faithful understanding we have to witness to others, just as Anna witnessed to Mary and Joseph that day in the temple.

II. In Jerusalem

Acts 2:16-21

16 But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel;

17 And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams:

18 And on my servants and on my

handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy:

19 And I will shew wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath; blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke:

20 The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before that great and notable day of the Lord come:

21 And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

16. Acts 2 continues the story of Jesus' followers after His resurrection and ascension. A group of about 120 remained in Jerusalem, including the apostles (minus Judas); Jesus' brothers; and a group of women that included Mary, Jesus' mother (Acts 1:14-15).

On Pentecost, 50 days after the Passover, the Holy Spirit descended on this group in spectacular fashion (Acts 2:1-4). This dramatic event drew a diverse crowd as an audience for Peter (2:5-11). It was an ideal setting to explain the significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The word *this* refers to the speaking and hearing in the native languages of those gathered (Acts 2:11). By way of explanation, Peter's quotation *spoken by the prophet* Joel that follows comes from Joel 2:28-32.

17-18. The prophet Joel, about whom we know virtually nothing, had foreseen the day of the Lord centuries earlier. That day would be a time when God would intervene dramatically in the history of Israel (see Joel 2:1). *The last days* refers to the beginning of the final era in God's plan for humanity. We have been in these last days for some 2,000 years now (Hebrews 1:1-2; 1 Peter 1:20; 1 John 2:18). A widespread distribution

of God's *Spirit* would be a sign that the new era had dawned.

The inclusion of Gentiles was anticipated by the phrase *all flesh*. Then, lest he be misunderstood, Joel inclusively specified both genders and the spectrum of age groups as conduits for God's communication. Those whom society or culture previously viewed as being ineligible to speak on behalf of God would be empowered to do just that!

Joel's prophecy reveals that God's eligibility criteria are not necessarily what people expect. Peter spoke as if this prophecy was fulfilled, implying that some of the female followers of Jesus already had received this gift.

19-20. The specific *wonders* and *signs* noted here did not occur on the Day of Pentecost. Even so, there were supernatural sounds and visual phenomena that accompanied the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:2-3).

21. The events on the Day of Pentecost were not primarily about the miraculous gifting of the Holy Spirit or about the inclusion of both genders in prophetic ministry. The scope of salvation is more than welcoming men and women equally, and much more than the ability to prophesy. Rather, the primary issue is the announcement of salvation to all who *call on the name of the Lord*. Peter himself did not at this point fully understand the sweeping nature of the word *whosoever*, given his growing understanding in Acts 10:1-11:18.

III. In Caesarea

Acts 21:8-9

8 And the next day we that were of Paul's company departed, and came unto Caesarea: and we entered into the house of Philip the evangelist, which was one of the seven; and abode with him.

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

8. The following brief account occurred near the end of Paul's third missionary journey, in AD 58. More than two decades had passed since the Day of Pentecost. At the point where we join the narrative, Paul and companions were nearing the end of their multi-stop sea voyage.

Luke, the author of this narrative, was a traveling companion of Paul and was with him at the time of this incident. This is indicated by the use of the word *we*.

In reading of the arrival of *Paul's company . . . unto Caesarea*, we take care to observe that this is the coastal city of Caesarea Maritima, not the inland town of Caesarea Philippi. About 60 miles northwest of Jerusalem, Caesarea Maritima served as a Roman administrative center and military headquarters.

Philip the evangelist (who is not to be confused with the apostle Philip) lived in Caesarea. He is one of the "seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom" chosen for the ministry described in Acts 6:1-6. He later crossed cultural boundaries to preach the gospel to Samaritans (8:4-25), and then to an Ethiopian eunuch (8:26-40). Philip's home became a way station for Paul as he journeyed to Jerusalem for the final time.

9. The description of Philip's *four daughters as virgins* indicates their status as being unmarried. As such, they lived in their father's house where Paul was staying.

The four daughters *which did prophesy* and their evangelist father were likely well-known to Luke's readers and were celebrated as servants among fellow Christians in the area. Although this is a reasonable conclusion by inference, nothing further is recorded of Philip and his daughters.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

CALLED TO PROPHECY

Into the Lesson

Write two synonyms for each set of three words.

Summons / Bidding / Invitation

Bequest / Endowment / Grant

Speaking in a secular sense, what's the relationship between the concepts of *gift* and *call*? In a biblical sense?

Into the Word

Read Luke 2:36-28; Acts 2:16-21; 21:8-9. Answer the following questions from the perspective of the disciple Luke.

As you think back on these three episodes, what common elements do you see?

Why are those common elements important?

In what ways do those three episodes diverge from one another?

What is the significance of those divergences?

Given your knowledge of the Old Testament, what surprised you? Why?

What didn't surprise you? Why?

Into Life

What are ways that Christians sometimes value the Spirit's influence in some of their fellow believers more than in others? How do you correct this?

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

God gifts people for ministry according to His will and plans, not ours.