

## Despising Prophecies

Call to Worship: Psalm 119:9-16

1st Scripture: 2 Timothy 3:10-4:5

2nd Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:20

Hymn #26- *Our God Our Help in Ages Past*

Hymn Insert- *Speak O Lord*

Hymn Insert- *Open My Eyes that I May See*

### **Introduction:**

We continue down the path of working through a list of various exhortations, which the Apostle Paul has strapped onto this letter to the Thessalonians. And this morning, we come to one of those texts, which we, as Reformed Baptists might easily sweep under the rug rather than deal with it, because it poses some serious problems, if misinterpreted. And it is much easier to just kind of swoop past it, rather than wrestle through and deal with the text as it stands.

"Do not despise prophecies." Hmmm, what could that possibly mean? Well, in a Pentecostal or charismatic context, one can have a field day with this text, can't they? And that is where the danger lies. "Pastor Doug received a Word from the Lord yesterday, and the Lord said that He wants everyone in here to empty their bank accounts, to cash in any bonds they might have, to liquidate all unnecessary assets and to put the money at his feet, because the Lord wants him to purchase a pair of Lambourginis for our personal use. And don't worry, the Lord will provide for you abundantly more, if you sow this seed of faith. Don't despise this prophecy; don't be disobedient or you'll miss the blessing. You'll be left out and probably severely chastised for your lack of faith." Or, brother Eugene approaches me after the service and assures me that he has received a Word from God. And God told him that he wants me to immediately stop preaching through 1st Thessalonians and to start preaching through Isaiah, beginning next Sunday. I can't reject that, can I? To do so would be to despise, to shun and to reject the Word of God. Anyway, I think you get the point.

Needless to say, brethren, even in a first century context, where prophecy still existed for a time, this had absolutely nothing to do with what Paul was commanding here. Well, what then is Paul exhorting us to do here? The task of this message, will be to get to the bottom of this very question.

## I. Despising Prophecies

While the bulk of our study will be dedicated to understanding what Paul means by "prophecies" here, let's just briefly consider the word "despise," which is the only other key word used in this short exhortation. "Do not *despise* prophecies."

The Greek word used for "despised" here (*exoutheneo*) is used 15 times in eleven different verses in the New Testament. For the sake of time, let me just highlight three of these verses, so as to give us a robust understanding of the term.

1) In Luke 18:9, Luke prefaces our Lord's parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector with these words, "Also, He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and *despised* others..." The word here "despised" is the same word that Paul uses in our main text. And when you consider the imagery given in the parable; when you consider the self-righteous Pharisee's attitude toward the tax-collector, you really get a good sense of what this word means. We know that he looked down upon that tax collector, considering him to be worthless and without value; a reject, as it were.

2) Again, Luke 23:11, speaking of the horrible way in which Herod and his soldiers treated Jesus, states, "Then Herod, with his men of war, treated Him with *contempt* and mocked Him, arrayed Him in a gorgeous robe, and sent Him back to Pilate." That word "contempt" is our word. And clearly, Herod and his soldiers had no regard for the life of Jesus, whatsoever. Again, they despised Him, considered Him valueless/worthless and of no esteem whatsoever.

3) And finally, in Galatians 4:14, the Apostle Paul commends the Galatians for how they received him, in spite of his physical appearance, which was marred because of the persecutions he had suffered, prior to his arriving there. Beginning in verse 13 (and into 14), Paul states, "You know that because of physical infirmity I preached the gospel to you at the first. And my trial which was in my flesh you did not *despise* or reject, but you received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus." And so, Paul commends them for not rejecting him or considering what he had to say to be worthless or unsubstantial, because of his physical appearing. In fact, they received and welcomed him, as if he were an angel of God or Christ Jesus Himself. They gave heed to his teaching and received it as from God, in spite of how he looked.

Well brethren, I think we get the idea here. And so, when Paul exhorts, "Do not despise prophecies," he means, "Do not treat them as worthless. Do not reject them, trample upon them or treat them as if they carry no relevance." The positive aspect of this command would be, "Give special attention to prophecies. Believe them. Obey them. Let them govern your hearts and lives in all that you do. Take them seriously with an eager heart to observe them."

Well, that's the easy part. What then of these "prophecies," which Paul exhorts them not to despise?

## **II. Despising Prophecies**

Well, interestingly enough, the Greek word for "prophecies" here is a plural form of the word, "propheteia," which actually means "prophecy." And so, there is no doubt that "prophecies" here, is speaking of, you guessed it, "prophecies." And so, we don't have to do a word study on this particular word, because it is the same word used for "prophecy," throughout the New Testament.

That said, we do have to be clear about what is intended by "prophecies," because there is much confusion and misunderstanding surrounding the whole notion of what a prophet (who prophecies) actually does. Sadly, most people don't understand what a biblical prophet really is and does, which has led to a significant distortion of the term, leading to all kinds of abuse of Scriptural texts, such as the one that we are considering before us.

Were you to ask the average Christian today, "What is a prophet?," I would venture to assume that most would say, "Someone who predicts future events." Generally speaking, people tend to immediately think "future," when they think of a prophet. However, when you look carefully at the Scriptures, you'll find that all of the prophets of God spoke not only about future events, but also about past and present events as well. Often times, in fact, a prophet simply came with a message from God to a specific people, concerning the will of God about any particular matter. And to this end, brethren, a prophet, from the biblical standpoint, served rather, as a mouthpiece for God, rather than a teller of future events. Yes, many times, certainly they spoke of future events, but again, only under the broader umbrella of serving as the mouthpiece of God.

Now, this was especially significant throughout the history of the Bible, because throughout the history of the Bible, the people of God (and all people for that matter) did not have access to a Book that contained the entire will of God. The completed canon of Scripture did not exist when the events of Scripture were actually lived out. And so, God, in accordance with His own glorious purposes in redemptive history, chose to speak through prophets until He had established His church, through the redemptive work of Christ. Consider two significant texts that confirm this to be the case:

1) Hebrews 1:1-2: "God, who at various times and in various ways *spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets*, has in these last days *spoken to us by His Son*, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds..."

2) Ephesians 2:19-22: "Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, *having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets*, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

We make two critical observations here, brethren. First, the implication of Hebrews 1, is that God, in Christ, has given His final revelation to us. In the Old Covenant, He mediated His truth to us through prophets, who were His mouthpieces. But now, He has mediated His truth to us in the Person and work of Jesus Christ. Now, we might say, "But weren't there prophets after Jesus ascended into heaven?" Yes, but that is where our second text comes into play. Second, it is through the Apostles and the New Covenant prophets that the foundation of the church, attached to the Cornerstone of Christ, was laid. And so, they did not so much as add to Christ, as they rather reaffirmed and made clear what has already been revealed in Christ.

However, what are we to say when the foundation has been laid? According to Paul, the Apostles and their contemporary prophets are the foundation, upon which, the entire church is built through all of church history. And the very clear implication then, brethren, is that prophecy (in the "mouthpiece of God" sense) has ended when the time of the Apostles had ended, because they (along with their prophetic contemporaries) are the foundation, upon which,

the church (moving forward) sits. We do not continue building a foundation once it has been laid, do we?

Well, what then does it mean to be set upon the foundation of the Apostles and the Prophets? Well, certainly, it has nothing to do with their physical bodies, does it? It means that, the entire church, throughout all of church history, rests upon the infallible teachings of the Apostles and prophets. Well, how is this the case? The church does this by resting its very soul upon the completed canon of Scripture, which contains everything essential that has been passed on to us by the Apostles and the Prophets. [Hold up my Bible] Brethren, *this* is the ultimate mouthpiece of God for us. And, in so far as it is accurately proclaimed and taught, we can, in a very real sense, claim such preaching and teaching to be prophetic, not because of the vehicle that proclaims the Word, but because of the prophetic Word, which it accurately proclaims.

Now, at the time when Paul had written this letter to the Thessalonians, the foundation was probably still being laid. And so, there were prophetic utterances, in tune with all that Christ had accomplished, which were very much applicable to this exhortation. Paul could command the Thessalonians to not despise present prophecies, declared by contemporary Apostles and Prophets, which related to the incarnation, ministry, life, death, resurrection, ascension and perhaps very particularly to the future coming of Christ (as we'll note in a moment). But, in our present day setting, where the foundation has long since been laid, this text finds its complete relevance and application in the written and faithfully proclaimed Word of God.

Paul does not list specific prophecies here, and for good reason, because none of the Scriptures are to be despised. But, we certainly can presume, at the least, for the Thessalonians, in accordance with the context of 1st and 2nd Thessalonians, that the return of Christ was at least significantly in mind. Some were beginning to question, "Well when is He really coming, or is He coming at all?" In 2nd Thessalonians, there were heretics who were so much as saying that Christ had already come. And so, how you view the second coming of Christ will definitely affect how you live. And if you don't believe the truth, given in God's perfect and prophetic Word, it will lead you to live in an ungodly manner, clearly indicating that you despise God's prophecies.

And so, brethren, much to the chagrin of many of our charismatic brethren, particularly from our modern day standpoint, this text has absolutely nothing to do with new prophecies, visions or dreams, which are allegedly received today...concerning future events. No, this has everything to do with how we treat the Word of God, as it stands, as it is read, as it is faithfully taught, and as it is faithfully preached. To neglect God's Word, or to trample upon it, or to reject it, or to treat it as if it has no true relevant value for affecting how you think and live (for how it affects your general worldview), is to despise prophecy, in violation of Paul's exhortation here.

[Note: Here, we also find the connection to "quenching the Spirit." If we despise the Word of God, then we despise the Spirit's ultimate means of accomplishing anything in our lives. And thereby, we quench the Spirit]

### **III. Closing Thoughts and Applications**

Once again then, brethren, we cannot ultimately benefit from this exhortation, unless we carry it from the realm of the theoretical into the realm of the concrete. And so, we ask the question, "In what specific ways can we despise, rather than honor and respect prophecies?"

1) We despise prophecies when we fail to consider them. This would pertain more to a lack of reading and meditating upon the Word of God.

2) We despise prophecies when we don't give heed to what the Word of God teaches and commands. If our lives do not reflect obedience to the Word, then what does that prove, other than that we despise it? We consider it worthless, null, meaningless or of no real relevance to us.

3) We despise prophecies when we do not consistently attend the preaching of the Word. How often are you absent from that critical means of grace, namely, preaching. While we no longer have prophets, because the Word of God is complete, we do have preachers and teachers, who with the Spirit's aid, proclaim and explain what has been prophetically secured in this Book. In this sense, we can see how the NT preacher fills the shoes of the OT and NT "foundation laying" prophets. Your attention to, and response to the preached Word also is indicative to whether or not you despise prophecies. Do you come under the ministry of the Word with a prepared sense of desiring to learn and apply what is taught, or is it the equivalent of sitting behind a television set...just observing, and then onto other things. In what specific ways are you

applying what is preached, and laying hold of what God is giving to you, through His preaching vessels? How are these teachings from Thessalonians and 1 Peter...etc, impacting and changing your lives? In what specific ways are you prayerfully applying what is put before you each week? Ultimately, your actions, though imperfect in the best of cases, speak to the issue of whether or not you despise prophecies.

In closing, consider some comments on this text, given by various men:

John Gill: "...rather prophesyings here intend the explanation of Scripture, and the preaching of the word..."

Matthew Henry: "Despise not prophesyings (v. 20); for, if we neglect the means of grace, we forfeit the Spirit of grace. By prophesyings here we are to understand the preaching of the word, the interpreting and applying of the scriptures; and this we must not despise, but should prize and value, because it is the ordinance of God, appointed of him for our furtherance and increase in knowledge and grace, in holiness and comfort. We must not despise preaching, though it be plain, and not with enticing words of men's wisdom, and though we be told no more than what we knew before. It is useful, and many times needful, to have our minds stirred up, our affections and resolutions excited, to those things that we knew before to be our interest and our duty."

John Wesley: "Despise not prophesyings - That is, preaching; for the apostle is not here speaking of extraordinary gifts. It seems, one means of grace is put for all; and whoever despises any of these, under whatever pretence, will surely (though perhaps gradually and almost insensibly) quench the Spirit."

John Calvin: "Despise not prophesyings. This sentence is appropriately added to the preceding one, for as the Spirit of God illuminates us chiefly by doctrine, those who give not teaching its proper place, do, so far as in them lies, quench the Spirit, for we must always consider in what manner or by what means God designs to communicate himself to us. Let every one, therefore, who is desirous to make progress under the direction of the Holy Spirit, allow himself to be taught by the ministry of prophets. By the term prophecy, however, I do not understand the gift of foretelling the future, but as in 1 Corinthians 14:3, the science of interpreting Scripture, so that a prophet is an interpreter of the will of God. For Paul, in the passage which I have quoted, assigns to prophets teaching for edification, exhortation, and consolation, and enumerates, as it

were, these departments. Let, therefore, prophecy in this passage be understood as meaning — interpretation made suitable to present use. Paul prohibits us from despising it, if we would not choose of our own accord to wander in darkness. The statement, however, is a remarkable one, for the commendation of external preaching. It is the dream of fanatics, that those are children who continue to employ themselves in the reading of the Scripture, or the hearing of the word, as if no one were spiritual, unless he is a despiser of doctrine. They proudly, therefore, despise the ministry of man, nay, even Scripture itself, that they may attain the Spirit. Farther, whatever delusions Satan suggests to them, they presumptuously set forth as secret revelations of the Spirit. Such are the Libertines, and other furies of that stamp. And the more ignorant that any one is, he is puffed up and swollen out with so much the greater arrogance. Let us, however, learn from the example of Paul, to conjoin the Spirit with the voice of men, which is nothing else than his organ."

Amen!!!

The Lord's Supper!