

January 31
Lesson 9 (NIV)

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

LUKE 2:36–38

³⁶ There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. 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.

Acts 2:16–21

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

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

¹⁹ I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. ²⁰ The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. ²¹ And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ ”

Acts 21:8–9

⁸ Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. ⁹ He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.

KEY VERSE

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. —Acts 2:17

CALL IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Unit 3: The Call of Women

LESSONS 9–13

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the text quoted from Joel.
2. Explain the significance of fulfillment of Joel's prophecy.
3. Repent of valuing the Spirit's influence in some people more than in others.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Willing to Tell Others
- B. Lesson Context: Judaism
- C. Lesson Context: Paganism
- I. In the Temple (Luke 2:36–38)
 - A. Faithful Widow (vv. 36–37)
My Praying Mother
 - B. Expressive Witness (v. 38)
- II. In Jerusalem (Acts 2:16–21)
 - A. Unbiased Spirit (vv. 16–18)
 - B. Wonders and Signs (vv. 19–21)
- III. In Caesarea (Acts 21:8–9)
 - A. Evangelist Father (v. 8)
 - B. Prophetesses (v. 9)
Prayerful Impressions

Conclusion

- A. Gifted Women
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

Asher*Ash*-er.

AssyriansUh-*sear*-e-unz.

Caesarea MaritimaSess-uh-*ree*-uh Mar-uh-*tee*-muh.

EthiopianE-thee-*o*-pee-un (*th* as in *thin*).

eunuch*you*-nick.

Huldah *Hull-duh*.

Isaiah *Eye-zay-uh*.

Messiah *Meh-sigh-uh*.

Pentecost *Pent-ih-kost*.

Penuel *Pin-nu-el*.

Samaritans *Suh-mare-uh-tunz*.

Introduction

A. Willing to Tell Others

Consider the following actual and planned ministries. (Some of those mentioned work in dangerous settings, so no names are used.)

- Woman A planned to go to a country so remote and so expensive to get to that no missionary organization would sponsor the idea. She went anyway.
- Woman B, a missionary in the Far East, is age 91—and still working.
- Woman C, a tiny but bold person, rescues children in danger of sex trafficking.
- Woman D, against the advice of others in a certain foreign country, visited Buddhist temples and spent time talking about Jesus with the monks there.
- Woman E deliberately hires non-Christians to work for her Christian ministry in order to influence and help them.
- Woman F has plans to minister to shrine and temple prostitutes. (Yes, there's still such a thing.)
- Woman G would sing in bars—free of charge—if management would let her include a Christian song with each set.

We might wonder at the apparent lack of preparation of some of the above. But God isn't interested in perfection—he's interested in willingness. Where are you in your preparation for ministry? Are you waiting until you're perfect? If so, you will never answer God's call when it comes! Few of us will preach to massive crowds or build a megachurch. But through his Spirit, God recruits people for amazing assignments nonetheless. This lesson touches on just a few examples.

B. Lesson Context: Judaism

The five lessons of this quarter's final unit look at examples of faithful women in the first-century church. All three of today's lesson texts come from the author Luke. Analysis of his two books (Luke and Acts) shows that he had special regard for women (Luke 7:11–14; 10:38–42; 13:11–13; Acts 1:14; 16:13; etc.). These texts and others afford an opportunity to celebrate

stories that are sometimes overlooked. These women, named or not, played important roles in the ministry of Jesus that continued in the church.

The Jews of Luke's day lived not only in Palestine but also in enclaves of Greek and Roman cities throughout the empire (examples: Acts 2:5; 6:9; 14:1). Jews maintained their own practices regarding women's roles, as directed by their understanding of Scripture and of family structure from ancient times. In general, a Jewish female was attached to a man who served as her provider, protector, and authority. Normally, a father held this role for a daughter and a husband for a wife.

Devout Jews honored God's concern for widows (see Deuteronomy 27:19). 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 (compare Acts 6:1–7; James 1:27).

Women were allowed to attend synagogue gatherings, but only as observers. They were usually seated in a balcony or in some other section apart from men. The temple in Jerusalem that was rebuilt after the exile had a courtyard for women, beyond which women were not allowed.

C. Lesson Context: Paganism

Jewish communities experienced varying degrees of influence from Greek and Roman cultures. As the Roman Empire expanded, Romans brought their traditions to their conquered peoples. Roman society was dominated by men at all levels: business, politics, government, and military. But some women gained influence by their association with powerful men. In particular, some wives of the emperors achieved notoriety and celebrity. Sometimes mothers, wives, or sisters would even appear on the coinage of an emperor.

Women also played an important role in the civic religion of Rome, with the revered Vestal Virgins recognized as maintaining the ancient traditions of the city. However, the primary sphere of influence for Roman women was within the home, where they managed the household and saw to the proper raising of children. The Romans idealized the "matron," the upper-class woman who managed her home well and remained chaste, modest, and loyal to her husband (in many cases, in spite of his own lack of sexual fidelity).

Although the Greeks had been conquered by the Romans, Greek culture survived and remained influential in reshaping Roman society. Greek culture, like that of the Romans, was male-dominated; the home was considered to be the proper realm of women. The Greeks, however, were not as uniformly tradition-bound as the Romans in this regard. Some Greek women were people of business, and their wealth gave them influence in their communities (compare Acts 17:12).

Even so, relationships within families varied in pagan cultures. Some husbands loved and respected their wives and saw them as equal partners in life. Other men had little affection for their wives and might abuse or ignore them, with few consequences from society outside the home. Wives often tolerated sexual infidelity by men, but women who were unfaithful were liable to divorce, disgrace, or even death. No one considered this to be a double standard, but

simply the proper state of things in society. The prominence of even a few women in the New Testament accounts is therefore both surprising and instructive.

I. In the Temple (LUKE 2:36–38)

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, considered next.

A. Faithful Widow (vv. 36–37)

36a. There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher.

Anna is a Greek form of the name Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 1:20). Hannah's prayer of thanksgiving for Samuel (2:1–10) echoes throughout Mary's song of praise (Luke 1:46–55). Luke likely appreciated this further connection to that time past when a longed-for baby boy was born.

A prophet 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 in the same ways by communicating what God revealed to them for the people to hear.

The mention of Anna's father, *Penuel*, suggests that he was a well-remembered resident of Jerusalem as Luke wrote this account. His name means "face of God," or "presence of God." This implies his religious dedication, a faithfulness that was passed down to his daughter. Fittingly, his daughter would see God face-to-face when she met the baby Jesus.

The tribe of 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. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four.

Because *she was eighty-four*, she was old enough to remember when the Romans conquered the Jewish homeland in 63 BC.

37b. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.

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

What Do You Think?

What role should fasting play in your own devotional life? Why do you say that?

Digging Deeper

How do the precedents in Esther 4:15–16; Acts 13:2–3; 14:23 help frame your answer?

MY PRAYING MOTHER

My mother, Helen, was only 46 when my dad died. At the time, she was a nominal Christian. But a few years later, she experienced transformative renewal in Christ.

One demonstrable change was my mother's commitment to prayer. She made two lifestyle changes regarding prayer. The first was to pray for an hour a day. The second was to establish a literal prayer closet in an old storage space. Mom cleared stuff out to make room for a small table and a lamp. A little door ensured privacy. And a kneeling posture was required—there wasn't room to stand! As long as she lived in that house, Mom faithfully sought the Lord and made daily intercession for others in her prayer closet.

Where are the Annas—and the Helens—of our generation? Will we also faithfully serve the Lord with fasting and prayer?

—A. S.

B. Expressive Witness (v. 38)

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.

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 of Jerusalem* is not clear. To redeem means to “buy back,” or “deliver from danger” (Leviticus 25:29, 48; Hebrews 9:12). Anna could, like many others, have national politics in mind: redemption would mean that Judea 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.

The Spirit did not fill in any incomplete understanding Anna may have had regarding Jesus' role. This should be a comfort to us all, as we each know only “in part” (1 Corinthians 13:9). 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.

What Do You Think?

If you are a “senior citizen,” what methods of witness and service can you focus on that those of a younger generation might not do as well at?

Digging Deeper

If you are not a senior citizen, what can you do to support their witness and service?

II. In Jerusalem (Acts 2:16–21)

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 good news of the gospel.

A. Unbiased Spirit (vv. 16–18)

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

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. “ ‘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.

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

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 people* (compare Galatians 3:26–29). 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.

What Do You Think?

How should you react if someone comes to you claiming to have received a message from God in a dream or a vision?

Digging Deeper

Which texts help best in framing your decision: Acts 9:10–12; 10:3–19; 16:9–10; 18:9–10; 26:19; 2 Corinthians 11:12–15; Colossians 2:18; 2 Peter 2:1; 1 John 4:1–3; 2 John 9; Jude 8; Revelation 22:18? Others?

B. Wonders and Signs (vv. 19–21)

19–20. I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.

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). This part of the prophecy may point ahead to the second coming of Christ (compare Luke 21:25–28).

21. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ ”

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* (see Romans 10:9–13).

Peter himself did not at this point fully understand the sweeping nature of the word *everyone*, given his growing understanding in Acts 10:1–11:18. Not included in today’s printed text is the crowd’s reaction of asking what they must do and Peter’s calling them to repent and be baptized (Acts 2:38).

III. In Caesarea (Acts 21:8–9)

The events in the following brief account occurred near the end of Paul’s third missionary journey, in about AD 58. Thus 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.

A. Evangelist Father (v. 8)

8. Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven.

Luke, the author of this narrative, was a traveling companion of Paul (see Colossians 4:14) and was with him at the time of this incident. This is indicated by use of the word *we*.

In reading of the arrival of Paul’s company *to Caesarea*, we take care to observe that this is the coastal city of Caesarea Maritima, not the inland town of Caesarea Philippi (Matthew 16:13; etc.). Caesarea Maritima served as a Roman administrative center and military headquarters. About 60 miles northwest of Jerusalem, this city figures prominently in the book of Acts (see Acts 9:30; 10:1, 24; 11:11; 12:19; 18:22; 23:33; etc.).

Philip the evangelist (who is not to be confused with the apostle Philip) lived in Caesarea. He is one of the “seven men ... known to be full of the Spirit 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.

What Do You Think?

What do the changing roles of Philip the evangelist (Acts 6:1–6; 8:4–7, 26–40; and 21:8) teach you about how to react to God’s changing calls on your life?

Digging Deeper

In what ways does the further consideration of Stephen's changing roles (Acts 6–7) cause you to modify your answer, if at all?

B. Prophetesses (v. 9)

9. He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.

The description of Philip's *four daughters as unmarried* indicates their status as virgins (compare 1 Corinthians 7:34). As such, they lived in their father's house (see Lesson Context: Judaism), where Paul was staying.

The four daughters *who prophesied* 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.

What Do You Think?

In what ways can you better encourage fellow believers to use their spiritual gifts?

Digging Deeper

Are the best ways to encourage women to do so the same best ways to encourage men?

Why, or why not?

PRAYERFUL IMPRESSIONS

Several years ago, Leonie joined our church staff as missions minister. She often has occasion to share a Scripture that addresses a situation; along with that may come a perception or challenge.

When I asked her how this process works, she shared that as she enters into a time of prayer, she asks, "Lord, what do you want to say?" As she waits, Leonie is often impressed by everyday images or word pictures—along the lines of Jesus' parables—that may provide insight and hope for people and their circumstances.

If those individuals are present, Leonie strives to present her impressions in such a manner that it may be God's way of speaking to them. And she checks that her words are based on and consistent with Scripture, which is God's primary way of communicating with us, of course.

When you pray, do you expect God to listen and answer?

—A. S.

Conclusion

A. Gifted Women

An aged widow. A group of women who had followed Jesus and remained in Jerusalem after his ascension. A band of four unmarried sisters. The New Testament offers these as examples of first-century women who were endowed with the gift of prophecy.

Important questions exist regarding whether the spiritual gift of prophecy continues yet today (compare Zechariah 13:1–6; 1 Corinthians 13:8–12; Hebrews 1:1–2; etc.). But those questions, as important as they are, are not the focus of this lesson.

The focus, rather, is on using one’s giftedness in answering God’s call to ministry. As one observer put it, “When the church is working properly, every woman as well as every man will be using at least one spiritual gift in ministry to others in the body of Christ” (see also 1 Corinthians 12:1–11 and 1 Peter 4:10).

B. Prayer

Father, we thank you for the prophetic voices you have given to your people. We thank you for the examples of Anna, the Pentecost women, and the daughters of Philip as faithful people who served you. May we be as faithful! We pray in the name of the faithful Jesus, in whom we are one. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God gifts people for ministry according to his will and plans, not ours.¹

¹ Krause, M. S., Sloan, A., Gerke, J., & Nickelson, R. L. (2021). [Called to Prophecy](#). In R. L. Nickelson, J. A. Kenney, & M. K. Williams (Eds.), *The NIV Standard Lesson Commentary, 2020–2021* (Vol. 27, pp. 185–191). Colorado Springs, CO: Standard Publishing.