

Chapter XII: Prophecy

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Chapter XII: Prophecy

For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (2Pe 1:21)

A. The Scriptures And The Spirit Of Prophecy

"For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." (Rev 19:10e)

A.1. It's About Jesus

This text defines the witness or testimony of Jesus as being synonymous with, or at the heart of, the spirit of prophecy. These words not only define Scripture; they also define all utterances that claim to be true prophecy. Jesus Christ will be at the center of all prophecy, as He is of the whole Bible.

A.2. Prophecy And The Bible

There is a distinction in the level of inspiration, and hence of infallibility, authority and value between the written word of God (the Bible) and prophetic "words" in the church. Prophecies are desirable (1Co 14:1) and helpful (1Co 14:3-5), but Scripture is inspired and perfectly infallible and hence our final authority. It is to be desired more than gold (Ps 19:7-11).

Prophetic words given by fallible human vessels must always be verified by checking them against the infallible word of God, the Bible. God is not confused. He will not say one thing in His word and then give you a prophetic word to the contrary.

B. Personal Prophecy

"After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. Coming over to us, he took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, 'The Holy Spirit says, "In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles."',

"When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, 'Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.' When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, 'The Lord's will be done.' " (Ac 21:10-14)

"Personal prophecy" refers to a prophecy relating to personal matters which the Holy Spirit prompts one person to give to another. The Bible dearly allows for personal prophecy. Nathan brought David a "word" of confrontation from God (2Sa 12:13). Agabus warned Paul of trouble in Jerusalem. This passage above reveals safeguards against abuses of personal prophecy and allows us to implement this biblical practice safely.

LAYING FOUNDATIONS

- The word will usually not be new to the person addressed but it will confirm something God has already said. From Ac 20:22-24 we know that Paul was already aware of the issue Agabus raised.
- The character of the person bringing the word ought to be weighed. Agabus's credibility was based not on his claim to have a word but on his record as a trustworthy man of God often used in the exercise of this gift (Ac 11:28, Ac 21:10).
- Christian living is never cult-like, governed by omens or the counsel of gurus. Paul did not change his plans because of Agabus's prophecy or because of the urging of others. He received the word graciously but continued his plans nonetheless.
- All prophecy is in part (1Co 13:9 states, "For we know in part and we prophesy in part") which means that as true as that part may be it does not give the whole picture. Agabus's word was true and Paul was bound in Jerusalem. But this also occasioned an opportunity to minister in Rome (Ac 23:11).

We should prayerfully consider a prophecy given to us as Mary did the shepherds' report (Lk 2:19). A hasty response is seldom required; simply wait on God. Occasional personal prophecy is not risky if kept on a biblical footing, but neither is it to become the way we plan or direct our lives. God makes it clear in the Bible that we are His children (Jn 1:12) and that He speaks to us directly (especially through the Bible, see 2Ti 1:16). In Jn 10:27 Jesus says, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me." It is also obvious that if God can speak to one person about another that He can speak directly to that person Himself.

C. A Desire To Be Prophetic

We should desire to be a people who hear from God and declare His word. Isa 42:9 tells us that before God does anything, He announces it to us. God has chosen to work through men and, as His people, we are responsible to declare God's word (both the written Word and the new things He is wanting to say) to the world. In 1Co 14:1 and 1Co 14:39 we are told to desire the gift of prophecy.

We see from the above texts that it is up to us to desire and seek after God's voice. In general, God does not pick a random person and send a booming voice down from heaven to him. Rather, it is those who diligently seek God who will hear Him. (God can and does speak in an audible voice on occasion, as in 1Sa 3:10-11, but this is fairly rare.)

Ask God questions. In Jer 33:3 God promises to answer us with great and unsearchable things. We can ask God, with a pure heart, why we are not seeing many healings and why we are not growing as we should. (God is not scared of questions.) God will lead and direct us when we seek His kingdom (Mt 6:33). We should desire to hear from God to help others and ourselves. Furthermore, we need to be able to hear God in everyday life. We are told that Jesus only did what he saw the Father doing (Jn 5:19). In the same way, we must desire to do only what the Father wants us to do. We have to stay close to Him so that we can know what He wants us to do (in small things and greater life direction).

LAYING FOUNDATIONS

D. Can We Really Expect To Hear God?

In In 10:3-5 we see Jesus as the good shepherd. He desires to guide us and He wants us to know His voice. When we know His voice we will be able to discern between what is truth and what is not truth (because Jesus is the Truth, In 14:6) and we know that it is God's desire for us to be led into all truth (Jn 14:16-17, Jn 14:26, Jn 16:13). There are many examples of men in the Bible who heard God's voice (not necessarily an audible voice in the natural). One example is Jeremiah (Jer 1:2a, Jer 1:4-5, Jer 1:11-14, Jer 2:1, Jer 2:4-5). 1Co 2:12 tells us that God wants us to understand what He has given us and Eph 5:17 tells us to understand God's will. We cannot begin to understand it if we have not even heard it. (This surely applies both to His written will and His will for our lives in particular.)

E. Recognising God's Voice

Usually we can recognise human voices. We can know who is speaking to us by using our ears and listening to what the voice sounds like. However, when we want to recognise God's voice, we have to use a different test.

As with human voices, the more we hear God's voice, the more we learn to recognise it. We have many voices (such as ideas, philosophies, traditions, rules and customs) speaking to us daily and we have to discern which voice is which (1Jn 4:1). By reading our Bible regularly we are able to hear God's voice. The Bible has been tested and proved to be God's word over and over again for the last 2,000 years. If we read our Bibles regularly we can "tune in" to God's voice.

Another test, in general, is this: does the message bring life, hope and encouragement (1Co 14:3), perhaps even a call to repentance, or is it a message that breaks down and destroys people? We serve a God of love and He gives messages of peace and love to build people up and draw them closer to Himself.

A good source of God's voice is also found at Christian meetings (such as church services or home groups, and even spending time with Christian friends). When we hear God's word preached, when we see God's word in action and when we hear about His ways we also become more familiar with His voice. See Ps 1:1-2 and Ps 119:9-16.

When trying to recognise God's voice, beware of "hearing" things that you may want to hear rather than hearing what God is really saying. (2Ti 4:3) talks of "what their itching ears want to hear." We must not tell others what they want to hear by making up things and we must not listen to those who just tell us nice things that please us. We need self-control over our emotions in this area as it is an easy place to make mistakes. Often being accountable to a friend or church leader in these matters can help. If you don't want to submit what you have "heard" you may be lying to yourself sub-consciously.

F. When And How Does God Speak To Us?

Here are a few of the ways that God can speak to us:

- God can speak to us as often as we want Him to do so, through the Bible (2Ti 3:16). We should be reading the Bible and praying every day (Lk 11:3, Jn 6:48-51).
- As with Jesus (Jn 5:19), God directs us in everyday situations. We don't have to spend hours praying and fasting before God will speak to us.
- God speaks to us when we need Him and when we call on Him (Ps 86:7).
- When others need to hear His voice, God speaks to us and asks us to deliver a message. This could be because the other party is not listening to Him very carefully (Jer 1-2) or simply because He has chosen to pass the message on through you. See 1Ki 11:31 when Ahijah speaks to Jeroboam. Paul of course wrote to Timothy giving him instructions and godly advice. God also speaks to others who may deliver a message to us - either a general message (such as a general truth from Scripture) or a specific message (a prophetic word). "And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe." (1 Th 2:13)
- We can also set apart times of prayer where we can pray and God can minister to us. Jesus did this often, as in Mk6:46.
- In special times of prayer and fasting, as in Ac 13:2, God speaks to us.
- God speaks to us in many different ways, for example, through His angels (Lk 1:11), or through visions (Ac 9:10, 16:9-10) and dreams (Ge 31:11), or words of knowledge and wisdom (1Co 12:8). God also uses our conscience (Ro 2:15) or discernment (Php 1:10), and He will even use circumstance (Ac 18:3).

G. What Do We Do With God's Word?

Once you desire to hear God and you seek Him sincerely, He will speak to you. If you feel you have a message from God, these are some guidelines as to what to do.

G.1. Check That It Is A Word From God

Firstly, check that it is from God. Does it contradict the Bible's message? If so, it is definitely not from God. God never contradicts His word. If it is an important issue and you feel you do not know the Bible well enough, discuss it with someone else who knows both the Bible and God better than you do.

G.2. Obey God

Once you have established that the message is from God, obey the message (Heb 3:7, Ps 95:7). In Ex 34:1-4 we can see that Moses obeyed God's instructions immediately. If we do not obey God, our hearts get harder and harder as we do not respond to Him. We start hearing God less and less, creating a downward spiral. If you find the message is not from God, discard it and try to learn from the experience as we all make mistakes. The first few times you hear from God you may be unsure if it is Him or not- but as time progresses and you get used to His voice, you will often be able to know in an instant whether it is from God or not and you can simply obey it as God speaks to YOU. Be secure once you know you have a message from God.

The message God gives you could be for someone you know, or perhaps your local church. It could be only for you. You have to know what to do with the word God gave you. Must you tell the person about whom God spoke to you, or must you be quiet about the issue God has revealed to you and pray into it? Must you appropriate the message into your own life or must you share it with the elders of your local church? These types of questions must be answered each time so that you can act on God's word to you in the best possible way.

It is possible that you may not understand the message God gives you. This happened to Daniel in Da 12:8a. You may need to wait on God until you get a better understanding or you may need to speak to a friend or elder in your church.

G.3. Keep The Word Safe

Just like other valuable information, we should record the words God gives us. This helps us as it gives us a record of the event and allows us to be faithful with the words. It also increases our capacity for more words from God if we are diligent and write down all we hear from God. Find a system that works well for you, such as using a file or small book. Small pieces of paper tend to get lost and a PC that is usually off does not lend itself to quick references.

H. Summary

God does desire to speak to His people. We must desire to hear from Him. As we seek after Him He will meet with us. God wants to communicate with us-if He didn't want to do so He would not have sent Jesus to die for us. We must make ourselves available to be God's messengers, taking both His written word and His spoken word to the people around us and into the nations of the world.