

Prophet of God – Or Liar From Hell?

There are many voices clamouring for our attention and we might expect the 'religious voice' to be soothing and reassuring, putting our minds at rest by telling us not to worry because 'everything is going to be OK.' Perhaps we come to church meetings to get another dose of that comforting medicine and go away calmed and relaxed, 'unwound' from the stresses of our daily lives?

Things were not very different in Jeremiah's lifetime. In those days, if you needed to find out what God was saying, you went to the prophets and of course you wanted to hear good news. The trouble was, what God wanted to say to his people was not very pleasant; he wanted to tell them to turn away from their disobedience, to warn them that they were going to be captured and go into exile.

Most of the prophets didn't even bother to ask the Lord what he wanted to say to the people. It seems that they were more interested in keeping people happy and keeping their good reputations, even making some money out of giving people good 'messages from God' (***Jeremiah 6:13, 8:10, 22:17***). They just made them up, stealing ideas from each other and passing them off as the word of the Lord (***Jeremiah 23:23-32***). The Lord was not just angry with them for making things up; he declared that he was *against* them! They had led God's people astray with their false dreams and reckless lies; God had neither sent them nor appointed them and they were not the slightest use to the people of God.

But of course they presented themselves as being prophets of the Lord. Deceptive, wasn't it? How were the people to tell whether they should listen to these prophets or to Jeremiah, who was after all in a minority of one? The only test which the Lord had given to the people generations earlier was a very long-term view: see whether what the prophet says comes about. If not, the Lord did not send him! (See ***Deuteronomy 18:18-22***).

Jeremiah was prophesying judgement to come on the people of God, warning them to repent and turn back to the Lord. If they did not, destruction, captivity and exile awaited them. The other 'prophets' were glossing over the problems and saying that everything would be OK. The Lord said it was like 'healing' a wound superficially, just closing the skin over without dealing with the infection underneath – guaranteed not to work! What's more, they went on doing it again and again! (**Jeremiah 6:14, 8:11, 14:13-15, 23:17**) The prophet Ezekiel had exactly the same problem years later – see **Ezekiel 13:1-23** – this time the Lord compared the false prophecies to plastering over a badly built wall with whitewash! In both cases, the Lord says that false prophecies **strengthen** those who do evil! (See also **Matthew 23:27-28 & Acts 23:3**)

What had gone wrong? Why did the self-styled 'prophets' get it so very wrong, and why was Jeremiah any different?

Let us go back and see how Jeremiah started off as a prophet. Unlike the false prophets, he did not volunteer for the job but was commanded by the Lord. He did not think much of his own ability; he was too young and no good at speaking, so he thought the Lord could not use him. First, the Lord said that he would put his own words in Jeremiah's mouth, then he told him the authority those words would have and their results. Jeremiah could not avoid what the Lord was saying, he had to speak out what he was told. See **Jeremiah 1:4-19**. In that passage, God gives him two simple tests; he shows him things and then asks him to say what he sees. Can he trust Jeremiah to speak faithfully what he is shown, even if he doesn't understand? Yes, he can, and he gives him the meanings straight away. (In passing, we can understand the reference to the almond tree much better if we realise that its name in Hebrew is 'the watcher', because its earliest blossoming shows that it 'watches' for the springtime!)

So, Jeremiah had a good apprenticeship with the Lord, learning to report accurately what he was shown. After only those two early tests (messages for Jeremiah himself rather than anyone else), the Lord sends him out with strong words for the people of God. The rest of the book is full of them!

But what about the false prophets? Their fundamental problem was that they had not heard what God was saying. Perhaps they honestly

thought that they were bringing 'a word from the Lord', that there was no other way to have a prophecy except to just make it up yourself and hope for the best. Perhaps they thought, "That seems like a good idea, I'm sure the Lord would want to say that", and so passed it on to the people. The Lord put his finger on their problem in **Jeremiah 23:21-22**.

So why are we looking at this today? Are we in any danger of listening to false prophecies? There are two possibilities. The first is that we will listen to the various lies that the world around us tries to feed into our thinking and general approach to life. These do not pretend to be from the Lord, but we can still sometimes be taken in by them, especially if we have not realised that we don't belong to the world system any more. As those who have put their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, we have been transferred out of the authority of darkness into the kingdom of God's beloved Son. (See **Colossians 1:13**.)

The second possibility is more subtle and dangerous. Have you ever been given a counterfeit £3 note? No, of course not – no-one would bother trying to make one, because there are no genuine ones to copy. Prophecy or 'a word from the Lord' is much the same. The really dangerous counterfeits are the ones that look **very** like the real thing, but are worthless because they do not originate from the Lord. They are particularly attractive if they fit in with what we would like to hear, just like the superficial words of the false prophets in Jeremiah's day.

We have been specifically warned about this in **2 Peter 3:1-7**. Peter writes that people will come in the 'last days', who will follow their own evil desires and ridicule the idea of Jesus coming back, saying that everything will just carry on as it always has, with no change, so there is no need to worry. Does that sound familiar? "Peace, peace", where there is no peace? Not tackling the deep-seated problems which exist in our individual lives and our relationships with each other (both outside and inside the Church as the Body of Christ), but just trying to gloss over and ignore them. Do we not realise that facing up to the actual situation is the only way forward, especially as the Lord Jesus has done everything to enable us to deal graciously with problems and heal broken relationships? False prophets will tell us to ignore that, deliberately forgetting that God's judgement is coming against all ungodliness.

But Peter calls them ‘mockers, or ‘scoffers’. This doesn’t only mean that they don’t believe that Jesus will come again. The word contains the meaning of ‘laughing at’, ‘making fun of’ or ‘trifling with’ something, just like children playing. Jesus said that the people of his generation were the same – see **Luke 7:31-35**. For these folk, it’s all a big game, Christianity is perhaps a bit like a hobby, you follow whatever bit of it you want to. Even ‘truth’ is reduced to a matter of opinion, instead of being vitally important. The latest fashion in music, teaching or spiritual experiences is the most important factor in their ‘faith’. It all too easy for this approach to creep into our own lives, and perhaps especially when we have begun to experience the Lord in a fresh way – are we simply looking for the next ‘experience’, playing with the trimmings of Christianity instead of learning to hear the word of the Lord?

Have we realised that, as believers, the Lord intends us to be prophetic, to hear what he is saying to us and speak it out to others? For example, Jesus says, *“My sheep hear my voice”* (**John ch.10**), Paul talks about the value of prophecy in church life (**1 Corinthians ch.14**) and **Hebrews ch.3&4** speaks about hearing his voice. We have been brought into a closer relationship with the Father through the Lord Jesus Christ than the relationship which any of the Old Testament prophets had with him – we need to give time to developing that relationship with the living God, in reality and honesty.

An earlier prophet, Micaiah, had faced a similar frightening majority of false prophets but refused to compromise what God had actually said to him. When one of them, Zedekiah, asked how the word of the Lord had come to Micaiah instead of him, Micaiah gave him a simple answer: *“You shall see on that day, when you enter an inner room to hide yourself.”* (**2 Chronicles 18:24**, but read the whole chapter for the complete story!) If we are to speak out anything of what the Lord is saying today, we need an apprenticeship like Jeremiah’s, to **learn to hear and recognise the voice of God**. This is not just for the ‘special’ Christian, it is part of our inheritance as those who are joined to the life of Jesus and one of the most urgent needs in the Church today.

Dave Taylor

June 1998