

# PROPHECY

## God's Messages & God's Messengers

*An exploration of prophecy, prophets and prophetic words*

### **I. What is Prophecy?**

Prophecy is a gift of God to proclaim the word of God. Prophecy is the declaration of the mind of God through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is based upon a profound awareness of the will of God.

Prophecy may point to the significance and importance of specific events in the past, the present or the future. It may warn of the consequences of specific decisions and events. Genuine prophetic inspiration is derived from God and interprets and clarifies what has happened, what is happening and what is going to happen.

Prophecy is a proclamation of God's intentions with regard to His people and the world.

God chooses His prophets and calls them to be His spokesmen. God speaks to His prophets through words, visions, dreams and in other ways.

The Bible is emphatic that God speaks through prophets and in the Book of Revelation it is declared "*The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy*" (Rev. (19.10).

It is important to have a balanced understanding of the gift of prophecy and it needs to be recognised that it can in no way compete with or threaten the authority of scripture. It always has to be tested through discernment.

Without prophecy we lose an essential element of our Christian inheritance. Without prophecy there is an alteration of our relationship with God, and a compromise of our sensitivity to His revelation.

### **2. What is a Prophet?**

A prophet is a person impelled by the Spirit of God to **speak** or **write** or **act** in a certain way.

The prophet may interpret past or present events, or point to coming events. The prophet may **interpret**, **explain** or **warn**.

The prophet delivers what he believes to be the **word** of God for His people. The message may be **foretelling** (predictive) or **forth-telling** (declaratory). It may also explain and interpret what God has done in the past.

Prophets declare what they believe to be the **will** of God with reference to the past, the present and the future. A prophet is an authoritative teacher of God's will. Prophecies may give **hope** to those in despair or **warning** to those who are rebellious or complacent.

The prophet generally has a very strong personal relationship with God and receives **revelation** from God in specific ways. The prophet is positioned in the context of history and speaks into current affairs.

Prophets are often raised up at a time of extreme need or crisis. Prophets are inspired by what they **see** and what they **hear**. Many of the Biblical prophets expressed strongly their personal inadequacy and unworthiness. However, their experience of God compelled them to be utterly obedient to what they heard Him say. Prophets accept the faithfulness of God.

A prophet is one who speaks **for** God and **before** God, in the sense of proclamation. The prophet is engaged in the process of revelation and to some extent preparation. The prophet is essentially a reformer, often calling for radical change, always affirming the Law, Kingdom and Judgement of God.

Whether they shatter the arrogant and self-righteous with warnings of impending disaster, or give hope to the needy of a better way, through the promises of God, prophets are often vilified, killed, mistreated or ignored.

### 3. The Nature of Prophecy

True prophecy presupposes a covenant relationship between God and His people. The prophet warns of the consequences of rebellion against God. He is sensitive to the pain of God when His people turn away from Him and sacred covenants are broken.

In the midst of stirring events the prophet discerns the **character** and **purpose** of God and His **judgement** and **mercy**. As the prophet is proclaiming the word and will of God, the message will always be consistent with scripture.

Prophecy reveals **direction** and **purpose** in life and points to the consequences of human behaviour and belief. The prophet is sensitive to potential dangers and **warns** of the future **consequences** of what is being said and done today.

Prophecy cannot be divorced from the affairs of the world and a fundamental role of the prophet is to **reveal truth** wherever it lies, in public or in private. This can be embarrassing and even alarming and is often a cause of difficulty for the prophet.

Prophecy is fundamentally concerned with the interaction or interplay of the past, the present and the future – that is its nature.

The role of the prophet is to point to the possible future consequences of what is being said and done today and, therefore, prophecy challenges the toxicity of lies and their implications for future generations. It can also, retrospectively, explain the errors of the past.

In Christian life there is often a divorce between prayer and social action, between theology and life, between the churches and society. One of the roles of prophecy is to end this disconnection which today is often rooted in the destructive influences of atheism, secular humanism, gnosticism and deism.

The role of prophecy is to bring the eternal reality of God's plans and purposes into the transient culture of the day. He displaces the relativism of human thinking with the absolute word of God.

Prophecy proclaims righteousness. This means right relationships – with God, with ourselves, with others and with all creation. It points to the dire consequences of wrong relationships. It challenges wrong and destructive attitudes in our culture.

The prophet inevitably stands in contradiction to the currents of the world. He does not conform to the spirit of the age but, rather, challenges the powers of darkness.

Prophets warn us of the dangers of disunity, compromise and syncretism. Prophecy brings hope to a world torn apart by injustice, confrontation, division and war.

### 4. The Prophetic Inheritance

The prophet is one who serves God and is His mouthpiece. Moses said, *"I am slow of speech and tongue"* but God said, *"Who gave man his mouth?... is it not I, the Lord? Now go, I will help you speak and will teach you what to say"* (Ex. 4.10-12).

The role of the prophet was instituted by God through Moses, in the context of a warning about the practices of sorcery and divination in other nations. *"The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him"* (Deut. 18.15).

Prophecy is associated directly with a process of revelation – the revealing of the will of God. It is **revealed truth**. God chooses those through whom He reveals himself. *"Surely the sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing His plan to His servants the prophets"* (Amos 3.7).

Prophets, such as Jeremiah, faced opposition throughout their lives. There is an underlying boldness in the way prophets speak – *"This is what the Lord says..."* (Jer. 2.5).

The Bible is clear about the identification of prophetic gifts. *"He said, Listen to my words: When a prophet of the Lord is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams."* (Num. 12.6).

In his instructions to the Church at Corinth Paul stated, *"If anyone thinks they are a prophet or otherwise gifted by the Spirit, let them acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command. But if anyone ignores this, they will themselves be ignored"* (1 Cor. 14.37-38).

Jesus specifically warned, “*Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves*” (Matt. 7.15).

Undoubtedly, one of the roles of the Christian prophet is to strengthen the witness of God’s people individually and corporately. In Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth we read, “*everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.*” (1 Cor. 14.3-4).

Prophecy also has a powerful impact on the unbeliever; “*...if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, ‘God is really among you!’*” (1 Cor. 14.24-25).

In the midst of turbulent events the prophet discerns the character and purpose of God, and His judgement and mercy.

## 5. Prophecy in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament there are four books attributed to those referred to as the major prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. A further 12 prophets, are referred to as the minor prophets – Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zachariah and Malachi.

There were, however, many other prophets. Indeed, a significant proportion of the Old Testament is given to prophetic writings and accounts of prophetic ministry. Other significant prophets include Samuel, Elijah and Elisha. There were also many who prophesied, or who carried out prophetic acts, who were not in a designated role of prophet. Many of these were exercising leadership of God’s people and include, for example, Gideon, Aaron, Deborah and King David. Moses was, perhaps, the most striking example of someone who God called to lead His people, who was also exercising a prophetic ministry.

In the Old Testament there are three Hebrew terms which correspond to the concept of ‘prophet’ (derived from the Greek ‘prophetes’).

The most common word used is ‘Nabi’, which means one who receives a word from God and who communicates this to another. In other words a ‘Nabi’ is God’s ‘mouthpiece’. The term refers to the transmission, precisely, of a message given by God. The inspiration is verbal.

The second word ‘ro’eh’ is derived from the verb ‘to see’. This word was used earlier than ‘Nabi’ and is better translated as ‘seer’. The third word ‘hozeh’ is related, meaning ‘to see a vision’.

Moses, who wrote the Law, was regarded as a prophet but was never actually described by any of the three Hebrew terms just mentioned. Samuel came as a second Moses and was referred to as a ‘ro’eh’. After the division of the Kingdom, Ahijah, Elijah and Elisha fulfilled the roles of prophets (‘nabim’).

The process of prophecy in Biblical terms is deeply rooted in obedient **listening** to God.

In Ezekiel we read “*...I heard the voice of one speaking. He said to me, ‘Son of Man, stand up on your feet and I will speak to you’.*” (Ezek. 2.1).

Isaiah said, “*Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send and who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here I am. Send me!’*” (Is. 6.8)

Most prophets, however, did not hear an audible voice but, rather, received a strong impression of what the Lord was saying.

Jeremiah said, “*The word of the Lord came to me...*” Later we read, “*then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, ‘Now I have put my words in your mouth’*” (Jer. 1.4,9).

Ezekiel was a prophet who **saw** – “*I saw visions of God*” (Ezek. 1.1). “*I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry*” (Ezek. 37.2). Regarding a vision of the ‘New Temple’, he was told: “*Tell the House of Israel everything you see*” (Ezek. 40.4), including a vision of the ‘river of life’ – “*I saw water coming out from under the threshold of the temple...*” (Ezek. 47.1).

In the Old Testament it is clear that the prophet was recognised as being called by God. For example “*and all Israel...recognised that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord*” (1 Sam. 3.20) and the prophets were in no doubt that they were commanded to proclaim God’s word.

There was a serious challenge in terms of identifying those who were genuinely authorised to speak in God's name. King Ahab preferred to listen to false prophets who told him what he wanted to hear, rather than to the one authentic prophet, Micaiah. *"The messenger [from Ahab] who had gone to summon Micaiah said to him 'Look, as one man the other prophets are predicting success for the King. Let your word agree with theirs, and speak favourably.' But Micaiah said 'As surely as the Lord lives, I can tell Him only what the Lord tells me.'" (1 Kings 22.13-14).* Similarly, Jeremiah was instructed by the Lord to give an unpopular message to Zedekiah and to the kings of surrounding nations, *"Now I will hand all your countries over to my servant Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon...if, however, any nation or kingdom will not serve Nebuchadnezzar...I will punish that nation...do not listen to the words of the prophets who say to you 'you will not serve the King of Babylon,' for they are prophesying lies to you. I have not sent them, declares the Lord."* (Jer. 27.6-15).

There were also many false prophets about whom God warned at that time. *"If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, 'Let us follow other gods' (gods you have not known) 'and let us worship them,' you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer...that prophet or dreamer must be put to death, because he preached rebellion against the Lord your God..." (Deut. 13.1-5).* *"But a prophet who presumes to speak in My name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death"* (Deut. 18.20).

One of the purposes of Old Testament prophecy is to teach the people to obey God and to make it clear that God will not forever tolerate the people who deny His existence, who engage in occult practices and worship false gods. The prophets, therefore, spoke out against sin.

The prophets spoke directly, clearly and simply about the dangers of turning away from God. *"If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, He will turn and bring disaster on you and make an enemy of you after he has been good to you"* (Josh. 24.20).

Many Old Testament prophecies fundamentally challenged people.

There were prophecies **against false worship** (Is. 1.11-15). There were prophecies **against idol worship** (Is. 2.6-11, 17-19). There were prophecies **against oppression and immorality** (Is. 3.11-26 and Amos 2.6-8). There were prophecies **against rich landowners** and those living **lives of decadence**. (Is. 5.8-17). There were prophecies **against wrong leaders** (Mic. 3.1-4). There were prophecies **against false prophets** (Mic. 3.5-7). There were prophecies **against kings** (1 Sam. 13.13-14; 2 Sam. 12.13-14). There were prophecies **against priests** (Amos 7.10-17).

Above all, the Old Testament contains countless prophecies about the coming Messiah.

In the Old Testament the prophet is essentially seen as a man of the Spirit, a servant of God, a messenger of the Lord and to some extent a shepherd of God's people, a watchman and an interpreter. The prophet constantly underscores the doctrine of the Law and the nature, character and worship of God.

## 6. Prophecy and Jesus

Jesus himself was acknowledged as a prophet. John reports, *"After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, 'Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world'" (Jn. 6.14) and "On hearing his words, some of the people said, 'Surely this man is the Prophet'" (Jn. 7.40).* Matthew reports, *"And they took offence at him. But Jesus said to them, 'Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honour'" (Matt. 13.57).*

Jesus referred to the importance of the prophets and their messages. In addressing the 'experts in the law' He declared, *"Woe to you, because you build tombs for the prophets, and it was your ancestors who killed them. So you testify that you approve of what your ancestors did; they killed the prophets, and you build their tombs. Because of this, God in his wisdom said 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and others they will persecute.' Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all."* (Lk. 11.47-51).

Jesus placed himself in the prophetic line but claimed He was 'more than' the prophets. In the synagogue in Nazareth, He read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, "*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor..*" and then stated, "*today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing*" (Lk. 4.18, 21). Later, as Jesus walked with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, after His resurrection, he said, "*How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?*" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Lk. 24.25-27).

There are explicit and general prophecies about the coming Messiah throughout the Old Testament. Many describe the coming of Jesus, His death and His to return in power and great glory. These include Mic. 5.2, Is. 53, Dan. 9.25-27, Jer. 23.5-6. There are predictions of the coming King and the time of His manifestation, the place of His birth, the family of which He would be born, the condition of the family at the time of His birth, the manner of His reception by His people, the details of His death, burial and resurrection.

The life of Jesus is undoubtedly presented in the New Testament as a fulfilment of prophecy.

## **7. Prophecy in the New Testament**

At the beginning of the New Testament we read of John the Baptist. He was the last of the prophets of the old covenant and the immediate forerunner of Jesus.

The New Testament consistently and repeatedly claims that the Old Testament prophetic expectations have been fulfilled in Jesus. The writers of the Gospels emphasised the reliability of the prophecies of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Significantly, the passion is accurately foretold. Later, Peter, newly filled with the Holy Spirit, and the Apostles declared, "*But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer*" (Acts 3.18).

The New Testament specifically refers to the importance of the prophetic ministry, which was exercised by both men and women who were

usually well versed in the Old Testament scriptures.

The Early Christian prophets had a powerful influence on the church. (Acts 11.27-28 and Acts 15.30-32). Prophets worked within the framework of the church and their activity was widespread. (Acts 21.10-11).

The role of the prophet was recognised as very important in the life of the Church (1 Cor. 12.28). Paul declares that the household of God is "*built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets...*" (Eph. 2.20) and that "*It was He [Christ] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up*". (Eph. 4.11-12)

Significantly, he urged the Thessalonians, "*Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good. Avoid every kind of evil*" (1 Thess. 5.19-22).

New prophecies were seen by the Early Church as a resumption and continuation of the old, in the light of the saving events to which the New Testament bears witness. However, the nature and function of prophets and prophecy in the New Testament differs from that in the Old Testament. The prophetic ministry is no longer confined to individuals, specifically anointed by God because, following Pentecost, the prophecy of Joel 2.28-32 was seen to be fulfilled. Peter declared "*Let me explain this to you...this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: '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...'*" (Acts 2.14-18). This was confirmed by Paul, who recognised that believers who had received the Holy Spirit, could exercise one of a number of spiritual gifts, one of which is prophecy (1 Cor. 12.4-11).

## **8. Prophecy in the Early Church**

The gift of prophecy clearly continued in the Early Church communities. "*We have different gifts according to the grace given to us. If a man's gift is prophesying let him use it in proportion to his faith*" (Rom. 12.6) and the

prophets often worked out of charismatic groups. For example we read in Acts, *“During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch”* (Acts 11.27) and *“Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers...”* (Acts 13.1).

Clear disciplines were set for testing and discerning prophecy. Paul wrote detailed instructions about how prophesying should take place in church gatherings. *“Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. For God is not a God of disorder but of peace”* (1 Cor. 14.29-33).

One of the primary roles of the prophets in the Early Church was the building up of believers in their faith. *“Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers”* (Acts 15.32); *“..everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort.* (1 Cor. 14.3-4).

Some had a special gift of prophecy but, in fact, it must be recognised that all Christians were seen to have a potential to exercise this gift. Paul said, *“...eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.”* (1 Cor. 14.1). In truth, the Early Church was an entire community of believers who were a prophetic people.

Members of the Early Church were, at least initially, Jews whose minds were saturated with the Old Testament scriptures. Following Pentecost Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, addressed the crowd with an authoritative declaration that they were witnesses to the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies (Acts 2.15-36). Similarly, Stephen, on being brought to the Sanhedrin, launched into a prophetic exposition of the scriptures regarding Jesus (Acts 7.2-53).

The revelatory nature of prophecy was the essential hallmark of the way in which the Early Church grew. Whilst rooted in Old Testament teaching the Apostles, inspired by the Holy Spirit, embraced new revelation from God. Paul's letters to the Early Church were full of revealed interpretation of the Old Testament. *“Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the*

*mystery made known to me by revelation”* (Eph. 3.2-3). Of particular note is the way in which Peter received and was obedient to God's revelation about salvation for the Gentiles and their inclusion in the Church (Acts 10.9 -11.18). Paul summed this up by writing: *“God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory”* (Col. 1.27).

## **9. Attitudes towards Prophecy**

In the past hundred years the Western Church has suffered because of the enlightenment influence with its, often exclusive, emphasis upon intellectual debate and discussion and academic analysis. There has been a serious neglect of the rigour of genuine waiting upon God, listening to Him and exploring the depths of contemplative prayer.

The discipline of the prophet involves careful observation and listening within the context of Biblical teaching.

There has been a danger that the concept of the continuing revelation of God's will for today is being marginalised and even rejected.

However, the root of prophecy is not human skill or cleverness, but rather the movement of God's Spirit upon those who are open to Him and who, in turn, give themselves to spiritual discipline, radical obedience and a readiness to respond to God's promptings.

God is undoubtedly speaking through prophecy and prophetic words today.

## **10. Prophecy Today**

In all the centuries of the Church, God's people have spoken prophetically.

In the past hundred years God has raised many of His people to give prophetic statements, which have had immense significance.

The prophet clarifies specific consequences of what is happening or might happen and points to the opportunities being presented by God. The visionary sees both great hope and opportunity as well as impending disaster.

Today there is, understandably, a widespread and growing fear of the unknown future,

irrespective of what passing figureheads and 'gurus' may say. We simply do not know what the future has in store for us.

Over the centuries before and after the coming of Christ, grave warnings have been issued and inspiring dreams shared. Sometimes the words and dreams of the prophet have been heard but more often than not they have been discarded or ignored. However, the value of any prophecy does not lie in the number of people who believe it, but rather the obedience of the prophet to deliver it.

Many Biblical prophecies have timeless value. For example the prophet Isaiah wrote "*Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light, and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter*" (Is. 5.20). These words apply just as much today as they did then.

While not himself judging, the prophet points to the judgement of God. The prophet recognises that the consequences of any nation or culture turning to false gods and idolatry are truly terrible. This timeless truth has not changed. Therefore, the prophet raises his voice as a warning.

The prophet detects the sadness of God over His wayward people. Therefore, he is inevitably led to weep with Christ as he sees the suffering of a fallen world. Jesus wept over Jerusalem. Do we weep over our nation? Vast parts of the world have been gripped with widespread violence, corruption, terror, injustice and poverty. Do we weep with compassion over the ruins?

Today Christians continue to believe that God is prepared to reveal His Truth to those who are genuinely listening, watching and praying. The truth is that the God who is the source and purpose of our lives is not absent; He is present here and now in the midst of His creation and may be encountered. He is not silent and if we truly listen we will hear Him speak.

What has He to say? Do discordant and contradictory words invalidate this? No, they simply mean that we have to listen more carefully together and, as one, to confirm what we are hearing.

In today's Western culture, God is dismissed, rejected, ignored. In this context we might be reminded of the words of Ezekiel, "*And you have forgotten me, declares the Sovereign Lord*" (Ezek. 22.12).

Today, in a world riven by violent conflict, Christians in all the continents are hearing warning words of God. Are they mistaken? The great integrity of prophetic words spoken in the past and recently should give us much hope. They have not always been words of comfort and assurance. Almost invariably they have been radically disturbing, but that is the nature of the Gospel. Christ comes to give peace in the midst of our disturbance but He also comes to disturb our 'peace'.

Increasing numbers of Christians of every tradition, have a profound conviction that God is today speaking words of immediate and urgent significance for our churches, our country and the world.

It is important that we do not run away when God asks us to speak. Too often Christians are deafeningly silent.

The prophet is invariably counter-cultural and rejects many values of contemporary society. Above all, the Church is to live out its prophetic calling, to be a clear sign of the living presence of Jesus Christ in the world, pointing the way to Him, not just through words, but by a visibly radical, holy lifestyle.

The prophetic message of a living Church is always one of hope. The declaration of Jesus, in the revelation of John is "*I am making everything new!*" (Rev. 21.5).

*“Behold, I am coming soon!  
‘Blessed is he who keeps the words  
of the prophecy in this book.’”*

*“Behold, I am coming soon!  
My reward is with me and I will  
give to everyone according to what  
he has done. I am the Alpha and  
the Omega, the First and the Last,  
the Beginning and the End.”*

*“The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’  
And let him who hears say, ‘Come!’  
Whoever is thirsty, let him come;  
and whoever wishes, let him take  
the free gift of the water of life.”*

*“‘Yes, I am coming soon’.  
Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.”*

(Rev. 22.7, 12, 13, 17, 20)