

True and False Prophets

<i>Text</i>	Jeremiah 23:28-29; Read Jeremiah 23:9-32
<i>Readings</i>	Matthew 11:20-30, 2 Timothy 3:10-4:8
<i>Theme</i>	The false prophets are condemned for their evil lives and their false message.
<i>Purpose</i>	To contrast the true prophets with the false so we can discern them in our own day.

It is not uncommon today to hear Christians claim to have received a message directly from the Lord. You will hear some say; “The Lord told me this or that”; or, “God spoke to me and told me to tell you about what he has in mind for you, or this town, or this nation.”

This has become a very common way of speaking in Charismatic and Pentecostal circles, almost to the point where it is a cliché.

Sometimes when people use this phrase all they mean is that they believe they should do this particular thing; or they are referring to something they read in the Bible; or they mean that they feel God is leading them in a certain direction – they have a spiritual hunch about this.

But at other times when people use these phrases they are making the claim that God actually spoke to them in some way. Sometimes they’ll describe this as a “word from the Lord” and at other times they will call this “a word of prophecy”.

Most of what people claim in the way of direct revelation from God is trivial, so much so that it is hardly worth mentioning. At other times they are simply restating what the Bible says; but making the claim that they got it directly from God in a vision, or a voice in their heads, or through an internal impression on their minds.

Yet some of what people claim in this way is on a much grander scale.

The NZ evangelist, Barry Smith, has made all sorts of prophecies and claims, most of which has never materialised.

Another Christian leader, Benny Hinn, told his congregation at the Orlando Christian Centre that the homosexual community in America would be destroyed by fire before 1995.

He also predicted that a major earthquake would occur on the East coast of America before the year 2000. Neither of these came true.

We can only conclude that Barry Smith and Benny Hinn cooked up these ideas in their own minds, and the Bible leads us to conclude that these two, and many like them, are false prophets.

There is a world of difference between the true prophets of God and those who are false. It is a difference of straw and grain says the Lord (verse 28); in today's language we would say that they are chalk and cheese.

So today we want to consider the **false prophets** and contrast them with the **true prophets**.

In each case we'll consider the **origin** of their message and its **effects**. Our focus will be on verses 28 and 29 but we'll draw from the rest of this passage to explain and illustrate these verses.

1. The false prophets claimed they had a dream!

What was the **origin** of this dream? Where did they get this message?

This passage makes a strong contrast between the dreams of the false prophets and the word of the Lord that came from the true prophet.

The false prophets did not get their message from the Lord. In verse 21 the Lord declared that he "did not send these prophets".

Well, where did they get it from? Three sources are mentioned.

In verse 13 we read that "They prophesied by *Baal*", which was one of the main gods of the Canaanites. They got their message from one of the pagan gods. This was not uncommon in Israel because they tended to mix the truth of the Lord God with the pagan religions around them. They brought other gods and idols alongside of the Lord God. They even brought these idols into the temple of the Lord! They had turned away from the Lord to such an extent that they even prophesied by Baal.

They also prophesied out of their *own minds* (verse 16). In verse 26 we read; they "prophesy the delusions of their own minds". And in verse 31 we read; they "wag their own tongues and yet declare, 'The Lord declares'." They claimed to speak a word from the Lord but they were only speaking out of their own imagination – they dreamt these ideas up in their own heads.

And their third source of information was to *borrow from each other*. Today we call this plagiarism; it is intellectual theft; it is stealing the ideas and thoughts of others and claiming them as your own.

What made this worse in their case was that they stole twice over – from each other and from the Lord. In verse 30 the Lord declared; "I am against the prophets who steal words from one another supposedly from me." The people who listened to them were doubly deceived. But in the final analysis, none of it came from the Lord.

How does this apply to us in our situation today? What warning should we take from this for ourselves?

As we have noted already there are people today who claim to give prophecies. But these prophecies will come from one of the same three sources as those false prophets in Jeremiah's day.

They will come from false, pagan religions which include the world of the occult and evil spirits. All this is growing rapidly in the New Age movement.

Or they will come from the delusions of their own minds – their own ideas.

Or they will come from what they borrowed or plagiarised from other people.

In evaluating all this we need to remember that all we need to know for faith and life in these last days, between Christ's first and second comings, has been revealed to us in the Bible (2 Timothy 3:16-17, Hebrews 1:1-3, Revelation 22:18-19).

The Bible is sufficient for knowledge of salvation and as the revelation of God's will for our lives. You don't need to look elsewhere; and you certainly should not listen to those who claim to give "prophecy" or "a word from the Lord".

What the Lord has not made known to us in his Word he has left to our own wise judgement and to our own decisions guided by a prayerful consideration of the Scriptures.

There are plenty of people claiming a word from the Lord and running with a message, but the Lord has not sent them.

One way to judge whether a prophecy or prophet is true or false is to look at **the effects** of the message. Let's examine what came out of the false prophets of Judah.

It is clear that they ***preached a false message***.

In verse 16 we read that they promised peace to the people of Judah who despised the Lord, "And to all who follow the stubbornness of their own hearts they say, 'No harm will come to you'."

This was the exact opposite of the message that Jeremiah proclaimed. He warned of war and punishment and destruction, whereas they promised peace and security and prosperity.

Time would tell that their message was false and merely the result of wishful thinking. They proclaimed what people wanted to hear, not what they needed to hear.

This still goes on today. The apostle Paul warned that "the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear" (2 Timothy 4:3). That sounds like our times. People hear what they want to hear.

They shut down those with whom they disagree. Everything has to be politically correct.

There is talk of legislation that will prohibit "hate speech". That would have ruled out people like Jeremiah and would probably disallow sermons like this one!

Today too false prophets are preaching a false message. Keep your ears open. Evaluate what you hear. Weigh it up against the Bible. Be discerning.

The false prophets also *lived godless lives*.

In verse 11 we read; "Both prophet and priest are godless." That is not surprising. Wrong teaching will produce wrong living. Unbiblical theology will lead to ungodly lives.

The description of verse 14 is even stronger; "among the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen something horrible: they commit adultery and live a lie." The prophets of Jerusalem were adulterers! The religious leaders were known for their sexual sin! They slept with the wives of other men!

The end of that verse suggests that some of them were homosexuals; "They are all like Sodom to me." Sodom and Gomorrah were known for their homosexuality, which is one of the reasons they were destroyed by the Lord.

But the religious leaders of Judah were also practising homosexuals. No wonder Jeremiah reacted as he did in verse 9; "My heart is broken within me; all my bones tremble. I am like a drunken man, like a man overcome by wine, because of the Lord and his holy words."

As you well know, this still goes on today. Some of the ministers in the mainline churches are homosexuals and lesbians. That ungodly and immoral lifestyle is associated with a liberal theology that denies the authority of God's word. Heresy will lead to ungodliness.

When false prophets and ministers live like this then they also *encourage others in evil*.

Verse 13b: "They prophesied by Baal and led my people Israel astray."

Verse 14b: "They strengthen the hand of evildoers, so that no one turns from his wickedness."

Verse 15b: "from the prophets of Jerusalem ungodliness has spread throughout the land."

When the religious leaders preach a false doctrine and live immoral lives this will have an effect in the nation. Religion will influence the policies of the nation and the lifestyle of the people for good or evil.

That happened in Judah in the 6th century BC.

That is happening today in NZ in the 21st Century and is most clearly seen in the promotion of homosexuality. One of the most vigorous spokesmen in favour of homosexuality has been the Labour Member of Parliament Tim Barnett. He arrived in NZ in 1991 with his partner, the Very Rev Jonathan Kirkpatrick. The Rev Kirkpatrick had been appointed Dean of St Paul's cathedral in Dunedin. Tim Barnett became an MP in 1996. Here is an example of two people holding religious and political positions working deliberately to lead people away from the God of the Bible and from his commands. False prophets will encourage people in evil.

But God warns that eventually they will be judged. Under Old Testament law false prophets were to be put to death. But the people of Israel had drifted so far away from God's laws that they couldn't even recognise false prophets let alone punish them!

Because of that the Lord himself would step in and judge them.

In verse 12 God warned; "Therefore their path will become slippery; they will be banished to darkness and there they will fall." This will be the final end of all those who are false prophets, from all times and all places.

2. Let's contrast these false prophets with **the true prophets of the Lord.**

That contrast is there in verse 28: "let the one who has a dream tell his dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully."

The message of the true prophet **originated in the word of the Lord.**

Jeremiah could say, "Thus says the Lord", because his message came directly from God.

When he was first called to be a prophet God had told him to "stand up and say whatever I command you" (Jeremiah 1:7). That's what he did throughout his ministry. He spoke God's Word faithfully, saying all that God wanted him to say.

He received his message directly from the Lord. He was one who stood in the council of the Lord to see and hear his word (Jeremiah 23:18). The word "council" suggests an intimate circle of trusted friends. The prophet enjoyed a close communion with God. He knew God well. God spoke to him and he spoke to God.

The one who did this most of all was the Lord Jesus Christ. No one has stood in the council of the Lord as Jesus has done. No one knows God the Father as he knows him. And no one can know God the Father except Jesus his Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. (Matthew 11:27).

This is why Jesus came into the world. He came to make God known. He came to explain the Father. He came as the climax of God's revelation in the Old Testament and as the fulfilment of all the prophets from Moses to Malachi. He came to tell us about God.

This God is the ruler of the heavens and the earth. He knows everything that is going on. He is a God who was nearby and a God who was far away (verse 23). He is transcendent and immanent. He is above and beyond us, but he is also close by to us, here and now.

When Jeremiah proclaimed his message he was speaking "the words of the Living God, the Lord Almighty, our God." (verse 36b).

This is the message of God today, from the Bible.

It tells us about this Living God, the Lord Almighty, who is your God, if you believe in him. Listen to him as he speaks to you through the Scriptures.

We need to listen to him so that his word will have **a good effect** in our lives.

God's word is like **a fire**. As such it can have a good or harmful effect.

Fire has different effects on different substances: It will harden clay but soften wax; it will burn away chaff but purify gold.

Fire is often a picture of the judgement of God on sin and evil. God's word will judge those who do not believe. Jesus said that he had come to bring fire on the earth – the fire of judgement (Luke 12:49). He will bring that fire when he returns in his second coming as the judge of all men.

But God's word is a purifying fire to those who do believe and are open and receptive to his word. It purifies us like gold. It burns away the sin and impurities in our lives so that we come out more holy, more like our Lord Jesus. Will you allow God's word to do his purifying work in your life?

In the same way God's word is like **a hammer**.

For unbelievers this is the hammer of judgement. Jesus described himself as a stone; "He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed" (Matthew 21:44). One day all who are unbelieving and ungodly will be punished by Christ the hammer who is powerful enough to break a rock in pieces!

But God's word is also like a hammer for believers. It breaks into our hard hearts, it softens up a stubborn will, and it can penetrate through a stony conscience.

People today often speak about God's word without care and precision. They speak about having "a word from the Lord" as though God were speaking directly to them.

They suggest that God has spoken to them in a vision or in verbal communication.

But as we have seen, God has spoken to us in the Scriptures, and most clearly through the Lord Jesus Christ. Today we need to listen to the word of the Lord as it comes to us through the Scriptures which proclaim that Great Prophet, Jesus Christ.

Are you listening to God's word?

Are you allowing God's Spirit to penetrate into your soul?

Are you permitting the word of God to judge the thoughts and attitudes of your heart?

Is God's word having a good effect in your life?

Is the Living Word, the Lord Jesus, having his way with you and in you?

Amen.