

What Is a Prophet?

by

Joelee Chamberlain

We often hear about prophets in the Bible, don't we? And at other times I've told you about some of the prophets and about some prophecies, haven't I? But maybe you've wondered about just what a prophet is. Yes, what does it mean when the Bible says someone is a prophet? Also, maybe you've wondered about what kinds of prophecies there are. And maybe you've also wondered how we can know if someone really is a real prophet, a prophet of the Lord, or not. So this time I thought we'd just quickly talk about these 3 questions. The question of what a prophet actually is and a little about the different kinds of prophecies in the Bible and then how we can know if a person really is a prophet. Would you like that?

Okay then. First, just what is a prophet? Well, in the Bible, a prophet is a person to whom the Lord spoke and told something, and then that person was to go and tell other people what the Lord had said to him. So, a true prophet is someone who tells people what the Lord has told him, right? And what the prophet then tells people is called a prophecy. Usually a prophet was a man. Men like Elijah and Jonah. But sometimes in the Bible women were prophets, too. Women like Miriam and Deborah. We often call a woman prophet a prophetess.

So what is a prophet? Yes, a prophet is a person who tells people what the Lord has told him. That question had a quick answer, didn't it?! So for the next question!

What kinds of prophecies are there in the Bible? What would the Lord tell a prophet that he was to tell to other people? Well, there were different kinds of prophecies at different times. It depended on what the people needed to be told.

Sometimes the Lord would tell the prophet something that was happening somewhere else right then. Or sometimes the Lord would have the prophet warn a person or even a nation to stop being bad or else they would be punished. Or it might be that the Lord told the prophet something to comfort people when they were sad or worried. But usually the Lord told the prophet to tell people about something that was going to happen in the future. It might be something bad that was going to happen or it might be something good that was going to happen.

These prophecies about the future might happen (be fulfilled) in a few days or maybe in a few weeks or maybe not for many years in the future, some not even for hundreds or even thousands of years in the future. And many times the prophecies in the Bible are about Jesus. About when He would come the first time to die for our sins, or

when He will come back again someday the second time and be King of the whole world.

So the prophecies in the Bible are very important, aren't they? Of course, with the prophecies about when someday the Lord Jesus will come back to earth again and be King of everything, these prophecies haven't happened yet, have they? So we who are living right now might be especially interested in those, mightn't we?

But now let's look at the last question. How we can know if the person giving a prophecy is a real prophet, that the Lord has really spoken to the person who says he is a prophet? That would be very important to know, wouldn't it? After all, even today there are people who say they are real prophets. But are they? How can we know who might actually be a real prophet and who is a false prophet? (False means not true or not real.)

Well, over 3,000 years ago Moses gave 2 answers to this question in the book of Deuteronomy in the Old Testament part of the Bible. Yes, Moses told the people 2 things that would show if the person were a real prophet of the Lord or if he were a false prophet. (By the way, a person who says he is a prophet could be either a man or a woman, but I'm just saying "he", as it's easier that way. But it could also be "she", couldn't it?)

One thing that Moses said is a sign of a real prophet is that everything, every prophecy that a real prophet of the Lord says, will happen, will come true. But if even one thing he says does not happen, then he is not a real prophet of the Lord God. He is a false prophet, and we shouldn't pay any attention to what he says, should we?

The other thing that Moses said is a sign of a real prophet is that what he says will always agree with what the Bible says. If anything at all that he says is different from what the Bible says, then he is a false prophet, and we shouldn't pay any attention to him.

But what if the person performs something that looks like a miracle but then says something that disagrees with what the Bible says? It makes no difference if he were to perform a miracle or not; if he disagrees with what God has already said in the Bible, then he is a false prophet, and we still shouldn't pay any attention to him. We should stay away from people like that.

So that is what Moses told us in the Old Testament. But does the New Testament say anything about false prophets? Yes, it does. The Apostle John in the New Testament warns that if a person claims to be a prophet but then he won't say that Jesus is both God and a man, that Jesus came to earth as a man but was still God, then that person is a false prophet. After all, the Bible teaches that Jesus, the Son of God came to earth as a human so He could die on the cross for our sins. Right? But Jesus was still God then too, wasn't He? Yes, He was both God and a man. And if a person claiming to be a prophet doesn't believe that and won't say that, why, he certainly can't be a prophet of the Lord, can he?! He is a

false prophet and is not telling the truth, and we shouldn't pay any attention to him either, should we?

So what are 3 things that are signs of a false prophet? One is if something he said would happen doesn't happen. Another is that he tells something that is different from what the Bible says. And then another sign of a false prophet is that he won't say that Jesus is the Son of God and that He also became a man; is both God and a man at the same time. If a person claiming to be a prophet of the Lord does any of those 3 things, then he is a false prophet, and we should stay away from him and not pay any attention to him.

But why might there be false prophets? Well, there are many reasons why a person might be a false prophet. Maybe he wants to seem important, so he pretends to be a prophet. Or maybe he is very wicked and wants people to turn away from the Lord God, the only God. Or maybe something isn't true, but he himself is deceived and thinks it is true, so he says that the Lord told him it was true. But it doesn't make any difference why he is being a false prophet; we should stay away from him, shouldn't we?

Of course, sometimes in the Bible a prophet of the Lord would tell a person or nation that was being very bad, that something bad was going to happen to them. So then the people would know that God could punish them -- but they also knew that God is merciful. So sometimes they would repent (stop being bad), and then the bad thing wouldn't happen. This way the prophesy would be like a warning to them. That was very kind of the Lord, wasn't it?

Remember, that's what happened with the prophet Jonah in Ninevah. You remember about that, don't you? The Lord had Jonah tell the people in Ninevah that Ninevah would be destroyed, but Ninevah repented, so the Lord didn't destroy them. They had paid attention to the warning, hadn't they?

But then Jonah told the Lord that's why he hadn't wanted to tell Ninevah, because it would warn them about the bad thing that would happen to them, and he knew that God was merciful. Why did Jonah say this? Because Jonah had been afraid that Ninevah would repent and then the Lord would not destroy them. You see, Ninevah was a very bad nation, and Jonah had wanted Ninevah to be punished, hadn't he? But the Lord wanted Ninevah to repent; that's why the Lord had Jonah tell them of the bad thing that would happen, so they would know and would repent (stop being bad). So Jonah's prophecy was a warning for them to stop being bad or else they'd be punished. Right? But if the Lord actually tells a prophet that something will happen, not just to warn people, then that thing will always happen. Always.

Let's see if I can give you a little example of what a false prophet might sort of be like. Hmmm. Let's see now. Okay, maybe this will help you understand. I'm sure your parents have told you never to talk to a stranger and never to go with strangers, haven't

they? So then if a stranger were to say to you, "Oh, but your parents told me that you could talk to strangers and that you should come with me", he would be lying to you, wouldn't he? What he was saying would be false, and you shouldn't pay any attention to him, should you? In fact, you should right away tell your parents about him.

Well, a false prophet is like a liar. But a false prophet isn't saying that your parents said something that they didn't say, is he? No, a false prophet is saying that the Lord God has said something that God did not say. and that would be false, not true. Of course, the person himself may have been deceived and is just passing on something he's thought or heard. But it still wouldn't be true, would it? And we should not pay any attention to what false prophets say, should we?

Okay, we said that there were prophets in the Bible. Who are some of these prophets? Well, there was Noah; and there were Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph; and Moses; and Elijah and Elisha, and many others. They are told about in many of the books in the Bible such as Genesis, Exodus, and II Kings. And there were also other prophets who wrote whole books in the Bible and even have the book named after them. Prophets like Isaiah and Daniel and Jonah.

Now, you probably noticed that all of the prophets I've mentioned are found in the Old Testament part of the Bible, aren't they? And there were many more prophets in the Old Testament that I didn't mention. But doesn't the New Testament have any prophets? Yes, it does, but not nearly so many as in the Old Testament. So now let's see who some of the New Testament prophets are, okay?

Well, in the New Testament, John the Baptist was a prophet. He told the people that the Saviour was coming and for them to turn to that Saviour. (Who was that Saviour? Yes, Jesus, of course!) And another prophet in the New Testament was a different man who was also named John, the Apostle John, and he wrote the last book in the entire Bible, the book of Revelation, a whole book of prophecies. Also, in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul wrote prophecies in some of his epistles (his letters). And sometimes the Apostle Peter gave prophecies.

Now, these aren't all of the New Testament prophets. No. Sometimes there are prophets who are just mentioned in a few verses, such as the prophet Agabus who warned the Apostle Paul that he would be taken prisoner if he went back to Jerusalem.

Of course, when Jesus, the Son of God, was here on earth, He was the greatest prophet of all, wasn't He?! We find the prophecies that Jesus gave in the first 4 books of the New Testament, don't we? In the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John that tell about when Jesus was here on earth.

But notice that there weren't so many prophets at the time of the New Testament, were there? Why not? Well, one reason is that the Old Testament covers about 4,000 years, while the New Testament only covers about 100 years! Though most of the prophets in the Old Testament were during the last about 1000 years of it. But still, 1000 years compared to 100 years! And since the Old Testament covers so many more years, it has many more things to tell about, doesn't it? Yes, the Old Testament is much longer than the New Testament. In fact, it's 3 times as long, so of course it talks about more things, including prophets.

Also, in the Old Testament times, many times the Jews would be worshipping idols, wouldn't they?. And the Lord sent many prophets to them to warn them to stop this, but they didn't stop. So finally they were captured by their enemies and were taken away from their land, the land of Israel. But then the Jews turned back to the Lord and were finally allowed to go back to the land of Israel, weren't they? And after that, they never worshipped idols again. Yes, in the New Testament times the Jews didn't worship idols. So then they didn't need prophets to warn them about idolatry, did they?

Another reason that there are more prophecies in the Old Testament than in the New Testament is that many of the Old Testament prophecies were about the first time that Jesus would come to earth, the time when He would come and die on the cross for our sins and then be alive again. But Jesus had already come to earth the first time during the New Testament times, hadn't He? So there was no need to have so many prophecies about that again, was there?! Instead, in the New Testament it tells a lot about how Jesus had fulfilled those Old Testament prophecies. So, most (though not all) of the prophecies in the New Testament are about the second time that Jesus will come to earth, about when the Lord Jesus will someday come back to earth and set up His kingdom and be King over everyone and everything.

Yes, the Old Testament tells that Jesus would come, both the first and second times, while the New Testament tells that Jesus did come the first time and that He will come again the second time. And by the way, the Old Testament has more prophecies about the second coming of the Lord Jesus than it does about the first coming of Jesus! Yes, there are many more prophecies in the Old Testament about the time when someday the Lord Jesus will come back to earth and set up His kingdom and be King of the whole world than there are about the first time when Jesus came and died for our sins and was raised from the dead. And just think. Everyone who has trusted in Jesus will be with Him in His kingdom when He comes again, both Jews and those who aren't Jews! Won't that be wonderful?!

But what does that mean, "who has trusted in Jesus"? Well, as we just said, it was prophesied in the Old Testament that Jesus would come to earth 2 times. Well, the first 4 books of the New Testament (the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) tell about the first time Jesus came to earth, don't they? Yes. And the first time is when Jesus, God the

Son, came as a baby, born to Mary in Bethlehem. (That is what we celebrate at Christmas time, isn't it?) And Jesus stayed on earth about 33 years. And He was both God and human, wasn't He?

But why did Jesus come to earth that first time? Yes, Jesus came to earth to make a way so that we could have our sins forgiven and be able to be with Him some day, didn't He? And how did Jesus do that, make a way for us to have our sins forgiven? That's right. By dying on the cross to pay for our sins. But did Jesus stay dead? No, of course not! Three days later He was alive again, was resurrected. (That's what we celebrate at Easter time, isn't it?) And lots of people saw Jesus alive. And this fulfilled some of the Old Testament prophecies, didn't it? And then Jesus went back to heaven. And everyone who believes this about His dying for our sins and rising from the dead, and trusts in Jesus to forgive their sins, will someday be with the Lord Jesus. And when He comes back to earth to be King of the whole world, they will be with Him then, too. Yes, they will be with the Lord God forever and ever! How wonderful!!

But why would God care that we could be with Him? Why would Jesus, the Son of God, leave His glory in heaven and come to earth and suffer and die on the cross? Why, because God loves us very much. As John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him, shall not perish, but have everlasting life."

I'm so glad that the Lord has prophecies in the Bible that tell us how to be saved from our sins, aren't you? I've trusted in Jesus and will someday be with Him. Have you?

And I'm so glad that there are prophets in the Bible who tell us about the Lord Jesus and when He will someday come back, aren't you? And how can we know that He is really going to be coming back? Why, we can look at all of the many prophecies about when Jesus would come the first time and see that they all came true. They all happened, didn't they? And since these all came true, then we can know that the prophecies about when the Lord Jesus will come back to earth someday and be King of the whole world, will also happen. They will also come true. We can trust in those prophecies from the Lord, too, can't we?!

So today we have quickly answered 3 questions about prophets, haven't we? What were those questions? That's right. The questions were: What is a real prophet? What kinds of prophecies are there? And how can we know if a person is really a true prophet of the Lord? I hope this has helped you understand about these things. Has it?