

# A More Sure Word of Prophecy

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**Bible Text:** 2 Peter 1:19

**Preached on:** Sunday, February 14, 2010

## **The GraceLife Pulpit**

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The thing that I keep coming back to is a question that trips a lot of Christians up. I get asked questions about this, I'm certain, on almost a weekly basis or I encounter people who struggle with this issue and the question is: how does God speak to us? How does God lead us? How does the Holy Spirit give us guidance? In what form does God teach us what we need to know? As you know if you've been going to Grace for very long and especially here at GraceLife, I'm convinced that what God has given us is for us in Scripture, that that is the only definitive guidance God has given us and if we obey that, he directs our steps providentially. I've said this many times and I know it confuses people because a lot of us grew up in evangelical environments where we are taught to listen for that still, small voice in your head, you know, and so you imagine that God is telling you things or giving you leadings that you have no basis to treat as authoritative. I'm convinced that this is a dangerous practice and so I want to talk about that this morning.

It's something I've been thinking about for many years. I've been involved for 35 years or so in the world of Christian publishing and one of the enduring lessons I have learned from my work is that there are a lot of very strange people out there writing books that ought never have been written. Christian publishers publish a lot of nonsense and it's frustrating to see that happen but I know from experience that there is 1,000 times more garbage that fortunately never sees the light of day simply because it's so bad that no publisher would ever publish it and all of it is submitted by people who really do think their writing is full of profound spiritual insight and wisdom and it's as if they see things nobody else can see and they are convinced of that. Of course, the ones who inevitably are most impervious to any kind of critique or correction are the people who claim that what they have written was given to them directly by God and you'd be surprised how many people there are who think that.

When I was working as an acquisitions editor at Moody Press, I used to get this stuff all the time from people who said, "God inspired me to write this." They expected me to treat their manuscript as the inspired truth of God. Someone sent us a manuscript like that several years ago when Lance Quinn was working at Grace to You and he claimed that God had given it to him and it was absolute truth and Lance threw it away and the guy showed up one day and wanted to his manuscript and Lance said, "I threw it away."

Apparently it was the only copy he had and the guy said, "You threw away the word of God?" because he was convinced that this was inspired truth.

My favorite incident like that was a letter that I received when I was working at Moody Press as a manuscript editor and I got this manuscript in the mail with a cover letter that said this and I'm quoting directly from the letter. I kept it because it was kind of funny. He says, "It may surprise you to learn that I'm just 22. My work, however, speaks for itself. These truths, indeed these revelations, were given to me by God and they need to be published for the whole world. By the way," he says, "I'm familiar with your policy of no cash advances. Do you have a no exceptions policy as well?"

I thought that was humorous so I kept his letter and threw his manuscript away and a few days later before I even had time to write back to him, he sent me a second letter, the same guy, and this letter said this and again I'm quoting directly, "Stop the presses!" he says, "My book must not be published in its present form. The material that does not edify must come out and new material must replace it." So, what was the word of God 3 days ago, he wants to revise now. He went on in this letter to explain why he was issuing this emergency recall. He said and I quote, "My former pastor, Sister B. R. Hicks, in direct disobedience to God lavished the prophetic gift meant for me on another whom she favored. She has not repented. She will not answer my mail and she may not even acknowledge that my words are legitimate prophecy. I greatly fear for her and the church which she pastors."

As I read on, apparently it was clear that this fellow's falling out with his pastor involves some moral failure on his part because he said this and again, I'm quoting his words, "Sister Hicks may tell you that I fell from grace but the heartbreaking truth is I was pushed." He says, "She repeatedly turned me away from my calling and as a result, all that God has given me in the way of prophecy has come to me in my separated, somewhat backslidden state. But I've been praying, fasting and studying and now I have a better understanding of God's message so help me, if you will, and return my manuscript for revision."

Now, I kept that because it's obvious from the letter that this fellow was in a twisted kind of way very clever. He wasn't stupid. He was literate. He was articulate and even a little bit witty but he was being totally serious when he claimed that this writing he sent us was inspired by God. He really believed that and oddly enough, his belief that God had inspired him didn't keep him from wanting to make revisions to the text. That tendency is the very thing that has always puzzled me the most about people who believe God is giving them private revelation. The messages they receive always seem pliable, don't they? The meaning of the message often changes with the circumstances. There is no legitimate hermeneutical approach for interpreting private messages from God and the meaning of any given message from God is often treated like a clay figure: you can bend it and shape it into any form that pleases you.

There are some famous examples of this. Of course, there was that incident in the late 1970s when Oral Roberts claimed he saw a vision of Jesus 900 feet tall and Roberts said

this giant vision told him he needed to build a hospital, a 60 story structure in South Tulsa. Tulsa, of course, is my hometown so I watched some of this unfold. Oral Roberts said that God had commanded him to do this and it was going to be called "The City of Faith." So he built the building and you remember there was a lot of difficulty raising the money and at one point he claimed that God had told him that if he didn't raise the money, God would kill Oral Roberts and so some guy who had made a whole lot of money running dog track races in Florida sent him millions of dollars to build this building which Oral Roberts did and no more than 3 of the 60 floors of that building were ever used as a hospital. Now more than 20 years after Oral Roberts' original vision of the 900 foot Jesus, I recently went to Tulsa where my dad had surgery in a building about a mile away and I looked out of my dad's hospital room at this 900 foot tall building and 80% of that building is still vacant and has never had any tenants.

The promised cure for cancer that Oral Roberts said God was going to give in connection with "The City of Faith," that never came either but until his dying day, Oral Roberts insisted that those prophecies were legitimate prophecies given to him by God. He was questioned about this by other charismatics and Charisma Magazine interviewed him in 1989 and when they asked him why "The City of Faith" fiasco happened, Oral Roberts said that this is what God planned all along. He said God had given him a new message now that explained the whole thing and here's what he said and I'm quoting from Charisma Magazine, their 1989 interview with Oral Roberts. He said, "God said in my spirit, 'I had you build "The City of Faith" large enough to capture the imagination of the entire world. I did not want this revelation localized in Tulsa, however,'" Roberts said, "As clearly in my spirit as I've ever heard him, the Lord gave me an impression. 'You and your partners have merged prayer and medicine for the entire world, for the church and for all generations,'" God said, "'It is done.'" Then Roberts said, "I then asked, 'Is that why after 8 years you're having us close the hospital and after 11 years we're closing the medical school?' God said, 'Yes. The mission has been accomplished in the same way that after the 3 years of public ministry, my Son said on the cross, "Father, it is finished.'""

So in the mind of Oral Roberts, this massive failed prophecy which played out across the front pages of the secular press around the world, this was no embarrassment at all. In Oral Roberts' imagination it's comparable to the finished work of Christ. That, I think, is blasphemy. But even more important: if you can twist your interpretation of the divine plan after the fact that way, there's no reason ever to regard any prophecy as false and that's exactly the problem. Even when prophets like this are falsified let's say, their followers never write them off as false prophets. It's a dangerous thing.

I can give you a long list of similarly famous failed prophecies. Benny Hinn made a whole string of them in 1989 as he looked forward to the 1990s. He claimed God had shown him several important events that would surely come to pass in the decade to come. He said Fidel Castro would die sometime in the 1990s. Well, that seemed like a good guess at the time but do you know what? It didn't happen. Benny Hinn also said that the homosexual community in America would be destroyed by fire before 1995. I don't know what he meant by that or what he had in mind but obviously that didn't come to

pass either. He said a major earthquake would wreak havoc on the East Coast before the year 2000.

He gave a string of prophecies like that for the coming decade none of which happened but it didn't stop Hinn from continuing to make fantastic false prophecies. Just a decade ago he was predicting that Jesus was soon going to appear visibly at Benny Hinn healing crusades and thousands of Benny Hinn's followers believed him. Some of them are literally afraid to doubt his prophecies because they equate doubting Benny Hinn's private revelations to doubting a promise from God. They see it as a kind of unbelief and that's what he has cultivated and as a result, an almost invincible gullibility has infected the modern charismatic and evangelical movements and it has created an environment where virtually anyone can make any bizarre prophecy he wants and if it turns out to be wrong, people will either forget or reinterpret the prophecy and if the prophet happens to get one prophecy right, if you get one prediction even partially right, people will eagerly publicize that correct guess as irrefutable proof that you are a prophet inspired by God.

And lots of people take advantage of that gullibility. I recently wrote about this on my blog if you read it this week. I talked about an incident that happened about 12 years ago when I was in India and there was an American evangelist holding some open air meetings in Poona, not too far from where I was staying at the time. This was a guy who often makes prophecies, this is his trademark, to prophesy natural disasters. Big catastrophic events: earthquakes, floods, famines, things like that. He's a classic prophet of doom and if you make enough prophecies like that, chances are you're going to get one of them right or nearly right someday. So this guy goes to India where he gathers huge crowds because he knows how to play on the fears of people who are steeped in the superstitions of Hinduism and his constant theme is prophecies about coming disasters.

So sometime, somewhere, this guy had been doing open air meetings in Poona and he prophesied a series of disasters: storms, earthquakes, financial disasters and so on. As it happened, while I was in Poona in February, I think it was, of all about 1997, the city was hit with a small jolt. It was an earthquake, a minor earthquake, which these things are as common there as they are in Southern California. It wasn't even enough to do any property damage but you could definitely feel it. It woke me up. It was early in the morning and it was enough to wake up the whole city and my first thought was, because I knew that guy was holding meetings, my first thought was, "He is going to claim that as a fulfillment of his prophecies," and that's exactly what he did. I happened to be visiting one of the workers from Grace to India who lived right across the street from this massive vacant lot where this guy was holding his open air meetings. That's how come I had heard of him. And that night, more than 10,000 people showed up to hear this counterfeit prophet. They didn't notice that no actual disaster had even occurred; the famines and the financial disasters he predicted never did materialize but he was claiming this earthquake was proof that he spoke for God and multitudes believed him.

That's the state of thinking in the world today. People are gullible. People are easy to fool and we think we're very sophisticated and modern but that is not true. People are more superstitious today perhaps than they've ever been and those who play on that kind of

superstition are the worst kinds of charlatans and yet, even people among people who believe the word of God, this kind of gullibility is rampant. The idea that God routinely speaks directly to people has found more widespread acceptance today than at any time in the history of the church. And this notion that God routinely speaks directly to people is found these days in some surprising places. It's not only charismatics who believe God speaks fresh words of prophecy to them. Southern Baptists have devoured "Experiencing God" by Henry Blackaby and Claude King, which is a book that suggests that one of the main ways the Holy Spirit leads people is by speaking to them directly. In fact, the whole point of the book is to say that if you are not hearing and responding to messages and impressions in your mind that you believe come from God, if you're not doing that on a regular basis then you're not really experiencing God as you should. And according to Henry Blackaby, when God gives you an individual message that pertains to the church, you are obliged to share that with the whole body and as a result, these extra biblical words from the Lord, in effect, prophecies are becoming commonplace even in some Southern Baptist churches. What I want to point out is that these private messages that people think they get from God differ only in degree and not in kind from Oral Roberts and his 900 foot tall vision. The very same superstition that allows Oral Roberts to believe that he got a message from a giant vision is the same kind of belief that makes a Southern Baptist reader of "Experiencing God" think God will speak directly to him. It's the very same theology.

Another surprising source of that kind of teaching has been Bill Gothard. Over the years, Bill Gothard who holds a slightly milder version of that view, but he still believes Christians can get extra biblical revelation from God and he says God gives this guidance to us through inner promptings that come from the Holy Spirit and so he teaches his followers how to use inner checks, he says, to determine God's will. People are taught to look for a feeling of inner peace when they think they're on the right track and if peace is missing, that's supposedly a message from God that something is wrong. Gothard says, "A wrong decision may look right but if we're alert to the prompting of God's Spirit, we will not have peace in the matter. You should have inward peace. Let the peace of God rule." Then he says, "That means be the umpire in your hearts." And he says some of the principles he teaches came to him that way.

Now, notice what he's saying: even if it looks right, even if it's rational and biblical and seems right, you're supposed to listen to how you feel to be the final arbiter. That is bad advice. Bill Gothard, though, defends his own dogmatism on many questionable issues by claiming God had showed him the truth by giving him peace about it. He's absolutely convinced that that is how God has revealed things to him. Now, think about it: that sort of thinking I know is very common. Some of us grew up in churches where that was more or less taught or assumed or you hear people talk about them, "God led me to do this. God led me to do that." You get the idea that that is how the Spirit works but if you think about it, that sort of thinking is totally at odds with the principle of sola scriptura, the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. We believe as Protestants that the written word of God, the Bible, contains everything necessary for our growth in grace and our salvation, everything God needs us to know for spiritual things. 2 Timothy 3:16 and 17 says this, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for

reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished for all good works."

Everything you need to furnish you spiritually is given to you in Scripture and that's the only sure and certain revelation you have from God. Your feelings are not reliable and there is no need for extra biblical revelation. If all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable and it's able to equip us thoroughly for every good work, you don't need extra revelation. The Bible will equip you for all good works. It will give you all the explicit guidance you can get from God. It contains principles to help you be wise and discerning as you pursue the course of your life and beyond that, the pattern we see in Scripture teaches us simply to trust the providence of God to order our steps; to trust that he will guide us not by giving us messages but by simply providentially ordering our steps rightly. You don't need an explicit message from God telling you whom to marry or where to go to school or where to go on the mission field. Obey the explicit commands and the implicit principles of the Bible and God promises that he will direct your steps beyond that so you can step out in faith without any direct message telling you which way to step. The Lord orders your steps through providence, not by private revelations.

If your life is in harmony with all the commands and principles of the Bible, you can actually do whatever you want without beating yourself up with introspection or fretting over whether or not God has told you to do something or not. If he has given you explicit instructions, you will find those instructions in the commandments of his word, not in your inner sensations or dreams of your imagination. There is no warrant in Scripture for us to listen for God's voice to speak in our heads. There is no warrant for us to obey private subjective impressions or any other means that bypasses the teaching of God's word. The Bible is God's word to us. Trust it. Lean on it and lean not to your own understanding, especially not to subjective impressions of whatever you might feel. Now, does the Holy Spirit move our hearts and impress us with specific duties or callings? Certainly he does but he works even through the word of God to do that. Such experiences are in no sense prophetic or authoritative. They are not revelation. They are the effect of divine illumination where the Holy Spirit applies the word of God to our hearts and opens our spiritual eyes to the truth of God's word and we need to guard carefully against allowing our experiences and our own subjective thoughts and imaginations to eclipse the authority and the certainty of the more sure word.

This is a very practical application of the principle of sola scriptura. If you seek private messages from God telling you things you know you won't find in the Bible, you have abandoned the principle of sola scriptura. Our mental impressions are neither trustworthy nor authoritative and, therefore, they contain far more potential for mischief than they do for good. No Christian ought to be taught to order any aspect of his life around impressions, feelings and it's especially unfortunate that there is so much interest in these subjective forms of revelation today in an era when the average born-again Christian is so ignorant of the objective revelation God has given us in his word. It's a dangerous state of affairs when knowledge of Scripture is at such a low tide. This is the worst possible time for believers to be seeking revelation, divine truth, in their dreams, their visions and subjective impressions. It's a dangerous thing and the quest for additional revelation from

God actually denigrates the sufficiency of the faith once for all delivered to the saints, to borrow an expression from Jude 3. When we do that it implies that God hasn't said enough for us in the Scriptures. It assumes we need more truth from God than what we find in his written word but if we really embrace the truth that Scripture is sufficient, that it contains all we need to know for life and godliness, how can we be seeking the voice of God in subjective experiences?

Now, even people who believe divine prophecy and divine revelation have ceased sometimes fall into the trap of thinking God speaks directly through subjective means. Well-meaning Christians, good people often think that in order to understand God's will on any given matter, you need to seek an impression or have a strong feeling that we interpret as a private disclosure of the divine will. In fact, it's not at all hard to find examples from church history of groups and individuals who have believed God was speaking directly to them through Scripture and been taught to seek that kind of direct revelation. My own historical hero figure, Charles Spurgeon, occasionally fell into that tendency and yet, Spurgeon also strongly cautioned against it at the same time. Listen to what he has to say, quoting from Spurgeon. He says, "Some I know fall into a very vicious habit namely that of ordering their footsteps according to impressions. Every now and then I meet with people whom I think to be rather weak in the head who will journey from place to place and will perform follies by the gross under the belief that they are doing the will of God because some silly whim of their diseased brains is imagined to be an inspiration from above." That's Spurgeon, not me. I wouldn't use such harsh language. He says, "There are occasionally impressions of the Holy Spirit which guide men where no other guidance could have answered the end. I've been subject of such impressions myself but to live by impressions is oftentimes to live the life of a fool and even to fall into downright rebellion against the revealed word of God. Not your impressions but that which is in this book must always guide you to the law and to the testimony. If it be not according to that word, the impression does not come from God. It may proceed from Satan or maybe from your own distempered brain." He says, "Our prayer must be, 'Order my steps in thy word.'" Good advice.

Now, normally people who lean so heavily on mental impressions like that have no intention of equating their own subjective feelings with divine revelation. They regard this subjective sense of the Lord's leading as something far less than prophetic; they would never claim that it's a revelation from God. But no matter what kind of significance you see in these mental impressions, it's never wise to order your life according to them just like Spurgeon said. It's never wise to seek divine guidance in your head. In the first place, there's just no warrant for that in Scripture. Nowhere does the Bible ever encourage us to attempt to discern God's will through means like that. Scripture always points us to the word. In fact, that sort of decision-making can lead to confusion, disappointment, sometimes even serious spiritual tragedy and the truth is that if we treat subjective impressions as messages from the Holy Spirit, that's really no different in character from claiming that we have received divine revelation. As I said earlier, the Southern Baptist who claims God told him whom to marry by speaking to him directly is in the same theological boat as Oral Roberts and his 900 foot tall Jesus. The same basic theology underlies both claims and although most Christians who follow

subjective impressions would never dream of listening to extra biblical prophecies, in effect that's what they're doing and making up things in their own head.

There is an historical context to this debate, by the way. This very same issue was hotly debated during the Great Awakening. It was one area where Jonathan Edwards and George Whitfield did not in the beginning see eye to eye. They were great friends, had deep respect for one another but George Whitfield was far more willing than Jonathan Edwards to treat subjective impulses as if they could reliably reveal the Holy Spirit's leading and in 1740, Jonathan Edwards confronted his friend, George Whitfield, on that very issue. He wrote a letter to a friend about their meeting and this letter is recorded in Iain Murray's biography of Jonathan Edwards. Let me read it to you. This is from Jonathan Edwards to a friend regarding his meeting with George Whitfield. He says, "I indeed have told several persons that I once purposely took an opportunity to talk with Mr. Whitfield alone about subjective impulses and he mentioned many particulars of our conference together on that matter. That I told him some reasons I had to think that he gave too great heed to such things and have told what manner of replies he made and what occasions I offered against such things and I also said that Mr. Whitfield did not seem to be offended with me but yet did not seem to be inclined to have a great deal of discourse about it and that in the time of it, he did not appear to be convinced by anything I said." By the way, if you've never read Iain Murray's superb biography of Jonathan Edwards, you ought to do it.

He recounts this whole episode and Murray says that at the very height of the Great Awakening, this whole issue of private revelation became the talking point of the whole country. It became one of the most debated issues in the Great Awakening and Edwards clearly warned his congregation not to place too much stock in subjective impressions. He saw that as a particular danger in a time of revival when religious affections are heightened and the imagination becomes more active than usual. In fact, listen to Iain Murray, quote, he says, "The impressions or impulses which Edwards criticized varied in character. Sometimes they involved an element of the visionary. Sometimes they appeared to provide foreknowledge of future events. And sometimes they were accompanied and supported by random texts of Scripture." Against this belief, Edwards argued that a Christian might indeed have a holy frame in a sense from the Spirit of God but the imaginations that attend it are but accidental and not directly attributable to the Holy Spirit. Edwards had carefully studied this whole issue. He was convinced that the tendency to follow subjective impressions was a dangerous path down which to travel.

Edward said this, quote, "An erroneous principle then which scarce any has proved more mischievous to the present glorious work of God is the notion that it is God's manner in these days to guide his saints by inspiration or by immediate revelation." Edwards saw a number of dangers in that practice, not the least of which was it's hardening effect on the person who received the revelation. "As long as a person has a notion that he is guided by immediate direction from heaven," Edwards says, "it makes him incorrigible and impregnable in all his misconduct."

Edwards also knew from both church history and personal experience that, in his words, "Many godly persons have undoubtedly in this and other ages exposed themselves to woeful delusions by an aptness to lay too much weight on impulses and impressions as if they were immediate revelations from God to signify something future or to direct them where to go and what to do." And Edwards' advice on the matter was straightforward. He said this, quote, "I would therefore entreat the people of God to be very cautious how they give heed to such things. I have seen them fail in very many instances and I know by experience that impressions being made with great power and upon the minds of true, yea, imminent saints are no sure signs of there being revelations from heaven. I have known such impressions to fail, in some instances attended with all these circumstances." So you hear what Edwards is saying: no matter how famous, no matter how godly, no matter how spiritual the person is who claims to have the revelation, these are dangerous things to follow and have often misled people.

I don't know what examples Edwards might have been thinking of but I know of a famous one that happened just a generation before Jonathan Edwards. The illustrious Boston pastor, Cotton Mather, one of my favorite historical characters, he had experimented with this very tendency, believing that God would grant him what he called "a particular faith" for specific prayers to be answered. He was convinced that God had promised to grant certain prayer requests and he would know when God had answered his prayer by an inward sense of conviction. And convinced that God had promised to grant what he prayed for, he prophesied on one occasion that his wife would recover from a serious illness that she had. Another time he prophesied that his father would return to England to serve the Lord and that his own wayward son, Mather had a son who was a rebel, he prophesied that this son would return to the Lord. All 3 of those prophecies failed and it wasn't until those predictions failed to materialize that Mather began to question this doctrine of particular faith.

George Whitfield also learned the hard way that subjective impulses can be fallible. When Whitfield's wife was expecting her first child, he told everyone that God had revealed to him she would be having a son who would become a preacher of the Gospel. So he said the Lord had told him to name him John after John the Baptist. The child was born, it was a boy. He died at the age of 4 months. That was Whitfield's only child. Iain Murray says, "Whitfield at once recognized his mistake saying," quote, "'I misapplied several texts of Scripture. Upon these grounds, I made no scruple of declaring that I should have a son and that his name was to be John.'" Whitfield says, "I was wrong." Murray goes on to quote Whitfield at a later point in his ministry when he recounted the folly of placing too much weight on internal impressions. Whitfield said this, "Many good souls both among clergy and laity for a while mistook fancy for faith and imagination for revelation."

They learned the truth the hard way. He learned his lesson by a difficult experience. "Many good souls," he says, "mistake fancy for faith." The truth is many good souls still fall into that same error. Many, it might even be correct to say most Christians believe God is somehow giving them inner promptings to guide them to make major decisions and a thorough search of church history would undoubtedly confirm that most believers

who lean heavily on these immediate revelations or subjective impressions they think come from God inevitably end up embarrassed, confused, disappointed, frustrated or all of the above because the fact is: nothing in Scripture ever suggests that we should seek either the will of God or the word of God, personal guidance or fresh prophecy, we should never seek those things by listening to subjective impressions.

One of the significant contributions of Gary Friesen's landmark book "Decision-making and the Will of God" is a chapter that explores the pitfalls of attempting to discern the will of God through subjective impressions. When that book came out, it was highly controversial because people are so tied to this idea that, "God will direct me through an impression in my head," that people rebelled against the point, the valid point that Gary Friesen was making. And he includes a chapter there that explores the pitfalls of this and he titles the chapter "Impressions are Impressions." He says this, "If the source of one's knowledge is subjective, then the knowledge will also be subjective and hence uncertain. An impression is just that, an impression." At one point he raises the question: how can I tell whether these impressions are from God or from some other source? And he answers the question this way: "That is a critical question for impressions could be produced by any number of sources: God, Satan, an angel, a demon, human emotions such as fear or ecstasy, hormonal imbalance, insomnia, medication or an upset stomach. Sinful impressions," which he says, "temptations is what they are, may be exposed for what they are by the Spirit-sensitized conscience and the word of God but beyond that, one encounters a subjective quagmire of uncertainty."

The fact is there are no instructions for us in Scripture how to determine whether subjective impressions are reliable or not and no command for us to follow these impressions. Scripture never commands us to tune into any inner voice. We are commanded to study and to meditate on Scripture, Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1:1 and 2. We're instructed to cultivate wisdom and discernment, Proverbs 4:5-8. We're told to walk wisely and to make the most of our time, Ephesians 5:15-16. We're ordered to be obedient to God's commands, Deuteronomy 28:1-2; John 15:14. But we are never encouraged to listen for any kind of inner promptings. On the contrary, we are warned that our hearts are so deceitful and desperately wicked that we cannot even understand them, Jeremiah 17:9. And if we grasp that, surely it should make us reluctant to heed promptings and messages that arise from within ourselves.

That, by the way, is one of the critical deficiencies of Wayne Grudem's position on prophecy. Wayne Grudem is a fairly sound scholar who on the other hand is overly sympathetic to the charismatic movement and wrote a book on prophecy defending the whole practice and it's not a good book. He defines revelation as "something God brings to mind" but he never explores the critical issue of how to determine whether an impression in your mind really comes from God or not and yet that would seem to be the most pressing question of all for someone who is about to declare that a mental impression is a prophecy from the Lord. Contrast that with Gary Friesen who writes this, "Inner impressions are not a form of revelation so the Bible does not invest inner impressions with authority to function as indicators of divine guidance. Impressions are

not authoritative. Impressions are impressions." Surely that is the path of true biblical wisdom.

Haddon Robinson goes even one step further. He says this, quote, "When we lift our inner impressions to the level of divine revelation, we are flirting with divination." In other words, he's equating that to a superstitious kind of fortune-telling. "Those who treat subjective impressions as revelatory prophecy are actually practicing a form of fortune-telling. Those who are willing to heed inner voices and mental impressions may be listening to the lies of a deceitful heart, the fantasies of an over-active imagination or in the worst cases, even possibly the voice of a demon because once objective criteria are cast aside, there's no way to know the difference between truth and falsehood."

I'd tell you if I had time about my visit one Sunday morning to the Anaheim Vineyard where people in the pews are regularly given an opportunity to stand up and prophesy, to tell out messages that they believe came to them directly from God. On the Sunday I visited, I was there with Lance Quinn several years ago, I sat between 2 dueling prophets each of whom stood up and gave the whole church prophetic messages that flatly contradicted one another and it all had to do with some matter of church politics, of course. They were using their supposed prophetic gifting to try to wage war on behalf of the 2 factions in the church and the most disturbing thing about it was the leadership of the church allowed these 2 prophets both to claim that God had told him he was on their side and they never said a word to try to resolve the conflict. I guess they feared God would individually reveal to the people in the pews which side was right.

But do you know what? Scripture says we have a more sure word of prophecy. Scripture very clearly addresses this issue. The Apostle Peter settled the whole matter for us by proclaiming the authority and the supremacy of Scripture. That's what I want to look at this morning just in the brief time we've got left. It took me a while to get there. 2 Peter 1, trust me, this will be fast because I really only have one point to make and it's what this text says. 2 Peter 1 and I'll read verses 16 through 18. Peter says,

16 For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. 17 For when He received honour and glory from God the Father such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory: "This is My beloved Son with whom I am well pleased." 18 And we heard ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain.

Now, Peter of course is describing an event that may have been the most spectacular spiritual experience of his life. This was the Transfiguration of Christ when Christ appeared in his full glory and Peter heard the voice of God and he saw Moses and Elijah face-to-face. Best of all, he got a preview of Christ in his glory. This was not a dream or a vision. It was not an impression in Peter's mind or a figment of his imagination. This was real life. He says, "We did not follow cleverly devised tales," he saw it with his own eyes. He says, "We were eyewitnesses." He heard the voice of God with his own ears, "We

ourselves heard this utterance." He was there in person with other apostolic eyewitnesses, "We were with him," he says. There was not much in this experience that was subjective. Not only Peter but also James and John could confirm that this was as real as it gets and yet, Peter goes on to say that even what he heard with his own ears and saw with his own eyes was not as authoritative as the eternal Word of God contained in Scripture.

Look at verse 19,

19 We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts: 20 Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. 21 For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

Now, Peter is not saying here, let's unpack what he says: he's not saying that his eyewitness testimony makes the prophecy of Scripture more sure. That's not his point. He's saying that the word of God by its very nature is more sure than his own experience. This is confirmed by Peter's argument in verses 20 and 21 where he establishes the authority and divine origin of every prophecy of the Scripture and the Greek word order in verse 19 also supports that as the true meaning of the text. Here is the Greek word order, here's an English translation, "We have more sure the prophetic word." More sure. More sure than what? More sure than experience, that's what he's talking about. Even the valid, genuine, eyewitness experience of multiple apostles. The word of God is more sure than that. Peter was saying that the written word of God is an even more reliable source of truth than his most spectacular spiritual experience ever. To paraphrase Peter's message to his readers is this: he's saying, "James, John and I saw Christ's glory firsthand but even if you don't believe us, there is one authority even more certain than our testimony and that's the written word of God." And the "we" at the beginning of verse 19 is generic, not emphatic. It means "you and I," not "we who witnessed the Transfiguration." Peter is saying in effect, "All of us who are believers have a word of prophecy that is more sure than any voice from heaven. It's the prophecy of Scripture," verse 20, "which is more sure, more reliable, more authoritative than anyone's experiences."

That surely puts subjective impressions in their proper place because remember, Peter's experience was not that subjective. What he saw and heard was real. Others experienced it with him but Peter knew that the written word of God is more authoritative than the shared experiences of 3 apostles. Why would anyone seek truth in subjective impressions that occur privately in their own heads when we have such a sure word in Scripture? And Peter admonishes his readers with the reminder that they would do well to pay attention to Scripture as to a light shining in a dark place, verse 19. The imagery here speaks of a single source of light like a night-light shining in an otherwise dark place. And Peter's point is that we don't need to grope around in the dark in search of truth but instead, we should focus all of our vision and all of our energies on the light that is cast by that single source, the written word of God. "Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path,"

Psalm 119:105. People who turn aside from the lamp and grope in the darkness after subjective impressions open themselves up to disappointment and deception and spiritual failure and all kinds of confusion, but those who keep their hearts and minds fixed firmly on the lamplight of Scripture, those are the truly discerning ones. That's Peter's message. That's the point of this passage.

During the Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards wrote this. I'll quote him one more time. He says, "Why cannot we be contented with the divine oracles? That pure, holy, written word of God which we have in such abundance and such clarity since the canon of Scripture is completed? Why should we desire to have anything added to the Scriptures by impulses from above? Why should we not rest in the standing rule God has given to his church which even the apostle teaches us is more sure than a voice from heaven? And why should we desire to make the Scriptures speak more to us than it does?" Those are great questions and in another place Edwards said it like this, "They who leave the sure word of prophecy which God has given us as a light shining in a dark place in order to follow such impressions and impulses are leaving the guidance of the polar star to follow a Jack with a lantern." The polar star is a clear and certain guide that never changes, that's like the word of God. A jack-o'-lantern is a great illustration because it's a whimsical, man-made symbol of superstition that moves about wherever it's carried and that is a fitting emblem for those feelings and those mysterious impressions that people often put their trust in.

Scripture says whoever trusts in his own mind is a fool, Proverbs 28:26. "But the word of God is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." David said, "Through your precepts I get understanding." He's talking there, again, about the written word of God. We need to walk according to the word of God and not be driven by our feelings. That is the heart of true wisdom. It's the only kind of obedience that counts. Jesus said, "If you love me, keep my commandments," John 14:15. Do that and you will be "like a tree planted by the rivers of water that brings forth its fruit in its season. Your leaf shall not wither and whatever you do will prosper."

Let's pray.

*Lord, help us to be obedient to the clear commandments of your word. We trust the goodness of your providence to order our steps rightly in all that we do beyond that but give us grace to obey what is so clear in your word and may we order our life according to that. May we by our obedience honor Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.*

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