

A FALSE PROPHET IS AN IDENTITY THIEF!

Today's Text: Ezekiel Chap. 13

Extracts:

Thus says the Lord God, “Woe to the *foolish prophets who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing... My hand will be against the prophets who envision futility and who divine lies; they shall not be in the assembly of My people, nor be written in the record of the house of Israel...Because with lies you have made the heart of the righteous sad, whom I have not made sad; and you have strengthened the hands of the wicked, so that he does not turn from his wicked way to save his life.*” [Ezek. 13: 3, 9, 22]

An identity thief is somebody who steals another person's name and other personal information for fraudulent purposes,¹ without his or her knowledge or permission. According to a recent survey,² there were almost nine million identity theft victims in the US in 2006, losing almost US\$57 billion or an average of \$6,383 per victim. It took a victim an average of 40 hours to get the matter resolved.

A false prophet is not any different. S(he) fraudulently poses as a prophet of God, a privileged position to obtain material benefits from gullible victims who may be members of a congregation. Just as the identity thief puts a burden on true identity holders to prove their authenticity, a false prophet compromises the integrity of God's word by misleading both the wicked and the God-fearing to miss the point of prophecy in the body of Christ. In today's lesson, based on Chapter 13 of the book of Ezekiel, God vows to deal ruthlessly with such false prophets.

What is your experience in your place of worship? How do you know which prophets are false? If you are a prophet(ess), how do you ensure that you are not an identity thief? What punishment does God reserve for false prophets? These and more are the issues that we shall examine in today's study.

¹ www.netalert.net.au/01990-Glossary.asp

² “How Many Identity theft Victims Are There? What IS the Impact on Victims?”
www.privacyrights.org/ar/idtheftsurveys.htm

1. Have you ever been a victim of an identity thief?

In recent times, some of my credit cards have been compromised by identity thieves. My cards have been used to pay for toll gates in Osaka, Japan, and to take up subscriptions for pets magazines in America. Yet, I have never been to Japan nor do I have any pets! For the past few months, I have been battling with the credit card companies to be discharged from any liability for such charges. The tough questions they ask make you believe that the victim is the one with an identity crisis!

I am not alone on this matter, and your experience could be worse. However, identity theft is not a new phenomenon. For example, recall how Jacob stole his brother's blessings. With the connivance of his mother, Rebekah, Jacob posed as his twin brother, Esau, and approached his father, Isaac, to receive the blessing of the firstborn. Isaac was blind. However, the voice he heard was Jacob's, not Esau's. His father said to him, "Please, come near, that I may feel you, my son, whether you are really my son Esau or not" [Gen. 27: 21]. After feeling Jacob's hairy hands (an identity stolen from Esau), Jacob said, "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau" [v. 22].

At the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned His listeners to "beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly, they are ravenous wolves" [Matt. 7: 15]. Just like Satan, who "transforms himself into an angel of light," identity thieves in the form of false apostles and deceitful workers (such as false prophets) are also striving to transform themselves into apostles of Christ [2 Cor. 11: 13-14]. Just as identity thieves are posing a major threat to electronic data keeping, false prophets are a major threat to the body of Christ as we approach end times. In His discourses on His Second Coming, Jesus warned that "many false prophets will rise up and deceive many" [Matt. 24: 11]. Therefore, the matter is important and urgent to merit our attention. For a start, let us look at the conduct of false prophets in the times of prophet Ezekiel.

2. The false prophets in Ezekiel's times

Here are the characteristics exhibited by the false prophets:

- *They followed their own spirit and saw nothing.* God called them "foolish prophets" that followed their spirit and to whom He had not shown anything [Ezek. 13: 3]. Scripturally, foolish persons are those who have said in their hearts that there is no God [Ps. 14: 1]. In this case, the false prophets were fools not because they did not believe that there is God but that they did not reverence nor fear Him. After all, "the secret of the Lord is with those who fear Him, and He will show them His covenant" [Ps. 25: 14].
- *They were doing their own business!* The prophets of Israel were required to go "up into the gaps to build a wall for the house of Israel to stand in

battle in the day of the Lord.” But the false prophets were “like foxes in the desert” [Ezek. 13: 4, 5]. Foxes are great opportunists that use their keen hearing, seeing and smelling skills to stalk their prey.³ The false prophets used their “magic charms” to “hunt souls there like birds” [v. 20]. So, instead of looking after the needs of the children of God, the false prophets were using their spiritual gift to hunt for prey to satisfy their own material and physical needs. In deed, “for handfuls of barley and for pieces of bread,” they were ready to kill the innocent and save the wicked with their false messages [v. 19].

- *They misled the people.* With their lies, they made ‘the heart of the righteous sad’ whom God had not made sad and “strengthened the hands of the wicked so that he does not turn from his wicked way to save life” [v.22].

For their falsehood, the false prophets invited God’s wrath and He was going to deliver His people from their grip for them to know that He is the Lord [v. 23].

3. But how shall we know false prophets?

There is hardly anybody who does not tell at least one lie each day, no matter how ‘pious’ we may be! But does that make all liars? Spiritually speaking, we all are. However, if you look at people that we call liars, there is something *habitual* about their lying record. It is almost as if lying is their profession, if not their nature! In like manner, that a prophet has given one false message does not necessarily make that prophet false.

A good example can be found in **1 Kings 13: 1-22**. God had sent a young prophet from Judah to Bethel to deliver a message to King Jeroboam of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The prophet was specifically told not to eat or drink there. He went there and duly delivered God’s message. When the king offered him refreshment and reward, the young prophet refused [vv. 1-9]. However, soon after he had left the king, a local prophet there invited him to come and eat with him. The visiting prophet made the same excuse to the older local prophet who replied him, “I too am a prophet as you are, and *an angel spoke to me by the word of the Lord*, saying, ‘Bring him back with you to your house, that he may eat bread and drink water.’” However, “He was lying to him” [vv. 10-18]. Soon after he had eaten, the same prophet that had just lied cried out to the younger prophet that, according to the word of God, he had disobeyed by eating and drinking there [vv. 21-22]. The first message was false; the second one was true. Was he then a false prophet? The rest of the story does not suggest that conclusion. Therefore, we need to look more critically at the matter.

To determine who is a true or false prophet, we need to know the *source* and *veracity of the message*. Clearly, the true prophet is the one who speaks the truth from God. However, the following circumstances need to be carefully examined:

³ “Foxes,” www.crittercontrol.com/?doc=resources_aaf_foxes

a) *What if a true prophet delivers a message that does not come to pass?*

One criterion for knowing the true prophet is that what s(he) says in God's name must come to pass [**Deut.18: 21-22**]. However, when Jonah was sent to Nineveh, he cried out as soon as he had entered the city, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" [**Jon. 3: 1-4**]. After forty days, the city was not destroyed and the prophet was displeased and he became angry [**Jon. 4: 1**]. Was he a false prophet? Not at all. The people had believed God's word and repented by fasting and praying. As a result, "God saw their works, that they (had) turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it" [**Jon. 3: 5-10**].

The main duty of a true prophet, as God had told the false prophets in Ezekiel's times, is to convey God's warnings to the wicked to mend their ways so as to avoid any disasters that could befall them. Therefore, if they heed His warning and repent, the prophet's work is done. S(he) is a true prophet and the message is true.

b) *What if a true prophet delivers a false message?*

Sometimes, the problem is not with the prophet but with the target. The persons seeking to hear from God may be so evil that God wants them to be deceived to take a course of action that could destroy them.

For example, Ahab, king of Israel and husband of Jezebel, was a very wicked king for whose sake, God had brought on Israel a drought that lasted for three-and-half years. Later, after there had been no war between Israel and Syria for three years, Ahab provoked an attack to take back Ramoth in Gilead. God wanted him killed in that battle. So, God *allowed* "a lying spirit in the mouth of his prophets" [400 of them!] to assure the king that he would win. God told the evil spirit, "You shall persuade him, and also prevail" [**1 Kgs 22: 20-22**].

Would you call Ahab's prophets false? Yes. Firstly, King Jehoshaphat of Judah who was visiting Ahab at the time had the spirit of *discernment* and he knew that that message was not from God when he asked Ahab, "Is there not still a *prophet of the Lord* here, that we may inquire of Him?" Secondly, when the prophet of God, Micaiah, in deed came, he prophesied that Ahab would be killed in that battle. Thirdly, the head of the king's prophets, Zedekiah, slapped the young prophet, Micaiah, saying, "Which way did the spirit from the Lord go from me to speak to you?" [**vv. 7-8, 19-24**]. Clearly, a true prophet will know when a message is not from God.

c) *What if a true message from God comes through a medium?*

There may be circumstances when God allows mediums to convey His true message to us. For example, after Samuel's death, the army of the Philistines gathered to attack Israel and king Saul was afraid. He inquired of the Lord "but the Lord did not answer him, either by dreams or by Urim or by the prophets." So, he went to the witch of En Dor who conjured up Samuel that spoke the truth to Saul about his impending death and that of his sons in battle the following day. Samuel added, "And the Lord has done for Himself as He spoke by me. For the Lord has torn the kingdom out of your hand, and given it to your neighbour, David" [**1 Sam. 28: 1-19**]. In another example, a girl possessed with the spirit of divination cried after Paul and his missionary team, saying, "These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation" [**Acts 16: 16-17**].

In both cases, the messages were true and came from God. However, only God knows why He allowed it. Nevertheless, we know that the mediums were not and could never be true prophets of God. The witch of En Dor was surprised to see Samuel come up, indicating that it was against her expectation [**1 Sam. 28: 9**]. In the case of the demon-possessed girl, Paul cast out the demon in her, in the name of Jesus [**Acts 16: 18**].

d) *What if God is not the source and the message is false?*

This is the case in Ezekiel's passage for today's study. God is not the author and the message is false and misleading. A good example can be found in the encounter between Jeremiah and a false prophet called Hananiah [**Jer. 27-28**]. Through the true prophet Jeremiah, God had sent to Zedekiah, king of Judah that neither he nor the neighbouring kings could resist the attacks of king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon whom He had given the power to conquer them and carry them into exile [**Jer. 27: 1-8**]. Therefore, they should not listen to their prophets, diviners, dreamers, soothsayers or sorcerers who spoke peace to them, saying, "You shall not serve the king of Babylon" [**v. 9**].

One such false prophet was Hananiah. In the house of the Lord, and in the presence of all the priests and people, he confronted Jeremiah, saying, "Thus speaks the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, saying, 'I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two full years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the Lord's house, that Nebuchadnezzar took away from this place and carried to Babylon'" [**Jer. 28: 1-4**]. He even went on to break the symbolic yoke around Jeremiah's neck, claiming that the Lord had told him that in like manner He would break Nebuchadnezzar's yoke within a space of two years [**vv. 10-11**].

You can imagine how confused the people were! One prophet spoke of exile that would last for seventy years; the other spoke of deliverance within two years; both claimed to have heard from God! Happily, God came down hard on the false prophet. A few months later, Hananiah died, just as Jeremiah had told him was God's wrath on him for being a false prophet [vv. 12-17].

4. Conclusion: Death is the punishment for being a false prophet

In the words of Jesus Himself, blasphemy against the Father and the Son will be forgiven; but the one against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven either in this world or in the world to come [Matt. 12: 31-32]. Since prophecy is a gift of the Holy Spirit [1 Cor. 12: 10], whoever prophesies falsely faces the danger of instant physical death plus eternity in hell.

What does that imply? It means that you have to be extremely careful. You can no longer say quite glibly, "The Lord spoke to me!" Be sure that He in deed spoke to you or risk the danger of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. It also means that you have to test every spirit bringing you a message from God. Some prophets have already been judged and condemned. Until they die physically, they are on Satan's mission to win more souls to hell with him.

Warning the church in Thyatira, Jesus said, "I have a few things against you, *because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols...* In deed I will cast her into a sick-bed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent their deeds. *I will kill her children with death, and all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts*" [Rev. 2: 20-23].

If you are not called by God to be His prophet, don't fake it. A false prophet is an identity thief!