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ARE YOU A PROPHET OR FORTUNE-TELLER?

Today's Text: Jeremiah Chap. 14

Extracts:

Then the Lord said to me, “Do not pray for this people, for their good. When they fast, I will not hear their cry; and when they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I will not accept them. But I will consume them by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence.” Then I said, “Ah, Lord God! Behold, the prophets say to them, ‘You shall not see the sword, nor shall you have famine, but I will give assured peace in this place.’” *And the Lord said to me, “The prophets prophesy lies in My name. I have not sent them, commanded them, nor spoken to them; they prophesy to you a false vision, divination, a worthless thing, and the deceit of their heart”* [Jer. 14: 11-14]

*There is the story of a pastor who prided himself as a powerful prophet of God. He was fond of prefixing everything he said with “the Lord said to me!” One day, a group of curious Bible college students approached him after service to enlighten them on how he heard from God. He told them that most times, he simply flipped open the Bible and where his eye fell was a clear indication of what the Lord was saying to him. To demonstrate the efficacy of that method, he randomly flipped the Bible open and his eyes fell on **Matt. 27: 5** which says in part, “(Judas) went and hanged himself.” He quickly closed the book and opened again by chance and his eyes fell on **Lk. 10: 37** that says in part, “Go and do likewise.” Now getting worried, he tried it once more and he came to **Jn 13: 27** which says, “What you do, do quickly.”*

Was God telling this prophet to go and commit suicide and do it quickly? I doubt if the man would obey! However, if by chance he had read a verse on blessings and promises, he would have taken that immediately as a word from God! That is the dilemma that believers face when prophets tell them what God has said. In today's lesson, the people of Judah in Jeremiah's time faced a similar problem. Some prophets had painted them a rosy picture of their future that turned out differently. God told Jeremiah that the word was not from Him. So, who really spoke to those prophets? How can we know what to believe? How can we differentiate the true messengers or prophets from fortune-tellers who are doing business with believers' desires to know something about their future? If you have the gift of prophecy, how can you know that you are in deed a prophet and not a mere fortune-teller like palm readers, star gazers and the like? These and more are the issues that we shall examine in today's lesson.

1. Jeremiah 14: The background story

There were terrible droughts in the land of Judah. Things were so bad that the people and the land thirsted for water that was not available. As a result, humans and animals starved. Jeremiah went on his knees and prayed that God should forgive the people's numerous backslidings. He reminded God, "we are called by Your name; do not leave us!" [Jer. 14: 1-9]. In response, God reminded Jeremiah that the people had gone too far and because "they have not restrained their feet, therefore the Lord does not accept them," and "He will remember their iniquity now, and punish their sins." Therefore, Jeremiah should no longer pray for the people for their good. God would neither accept their fast nor their sacrifices. Instead, He had chosen to consume them with war, famine and pestilence [vv. 10 - 11].

It was at this stage that Jeremiah reminded God that it was the prophets who had told the people otherwise; that God would give them "assured peace in this place" [v. 13]. In response, God told Jeremiah [v. 14]:

The prophets prophesy lies in My name. I have not sent them, commanded them, nor spoken to them; they prophesy to you a false vision, divination, a worthless thing, and the deceit of their heart.

If God did not send or command or speak to them, who did? Why did God still call them prophets even when they only prophesied false visions, divinations and worthless things? How then can we know truth from falsehood?

2. The challenge may be the prophet!

All over the world, anybody who has to drive a vehicle on public roads must have a driver's permit or license. However, *everybody who can drive is not called a driver!* There is a group of professionals who answer to the title, "driver." They may not drive any better than the rest of us. In fact, they could even be worse. Nevertheless, they are the ones who can monopolize the title. In like manner, there are multitudes of believers who can prophesy but that does not make them prophets. Prophecy is a gift of the Holy Spirit [1 Cor. 12: 10], and it is not for all even if all can earnestly covet it [vv. 29, 31].

Once God has given us a gift or talent, He does not withdraw it "for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" [Rom. 11: 29]. For example, if a person is created with high intelligence but refuses to go to school, God will not withdraw the brilliance from him or her. Some people may choose to bury their talents instead of enhancing them. In like manner, some people use their gift of prophecy to serve God while others may choose to use it to make money. That may help you to understand why messages from mediums, such as tarot card or palm readers, diviners and such- like people and those from the prophets of God may sometimes be similar. For example, even when the disciples of Jesus did not as

yet know that He was the Christ, “the unclean spirits, whenever they saw Him, fell down before Him and cried out, saying, ‘You are the Son of God’” [Mk 3: 11], just as the Old Testament prophets had earlier foretold. When Paul and Silas were in the church in the city of Thyatira, it was a fortune-teller, a slave girl with the spirit of divination, that followed them and cried out, saying, “These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation” [Acts 16: 16-17]. How then can we differentiate the true prophet from the false one?

To answer that question, we need to know (1) who spoke to the prophet, and (2) what the prophet reported back to us. Let us consider the following scenarios:

a) *When the news is good!*

Most of us want to be bearers of good news. Therefore, when God speaks good news to prophets, they will not hesitate to tell those for whom the message is meant. Take the case of Nathan that God gave the good news of David’s kingdom to be established forever. He did not hesitate to tell David God’s exact words [2 Sam. 7: 4-17]. But when he was sent to tell David about his adultery with Bathsheba, he began to speak in parables [2 Sam. 12: 1-4]!

In our churches, when prophets speak of blessings, we claim them as authentic and God-sent. But we also know that satanic forces can deceive us with good news and code it as coming from God. For example, during the temptation of Jesus, the devil “showed Him all the kingdoms of the world *in a moment of time* (and said) ‘All this authority I will give You, and their glory, for this has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish’” [Lk 4: 5, 6]. Can you imagine if that word had come to blessing-lusting believers of today? That is what fortune-tellers take advantage of. Unfortunately, some of such soothsayers are inside the church, masquerading as the prophets of God.

b) *When it is bad news!*

Bad news is hard to convey. When God has bad news for people, it is to warn them to give up their sins and repent. Usually, it is what people hardly want to hear. For example, after Jeremiah had prophesied hardship and exile to the people of Judah, even the priest, Pashhur, who was the chief governor in the house of the Lord “struck Jeremiah the prophet, and put him in the stocks that were in the high gate of Benjamin, which was by the house of the Lord” [Jer. 20: 1-2]. The bearer of bad news may take the brunt of his or her message! Therefore, you can hardly find fortune-tellers willing to convey bad news because they cannot make money from it!

Take the example of the witch of En Dor that was consulted by king Saul to bring up the prophet Samuel from the dead. Of course, she knew that in her trade, satanic forces would bring up evil spirits that would tell her clients good news about their circumstances. However, in this case, God permitted the true Samuel to appear! So, “when the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice. And the woman spoke to Saul, saying, ‘Why have you deceived me? For you are Saul!’” [1 Sam. 28: 7-12]. She was surprised because she did not expect it that way and she knew that the king would hear bad news! In deed, Samuel told the king that he and his sons were going to die in battle the following day [vv. 13-19].

From the forgoing, we are beginning to see the thin line between a prophet and a fortune-teller. The prophet is a true messenger of God. S(he) passes on what God has said, good or bad. The fortune-teller, on the other hand, is a motivation speaker! S(he) will only pass on good news but lie or deceive if there is bad news. So, as their “clients,” how shall we know the difference?

3. Marks of the true prophet

Here are some of the factors to look out for:

a) *What s(he) says must come to pass*

The word of God says, “and if you say in your heart, ‘How shall we know the word which the Lord has not spoken?’- When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him” [Deut. 18: 21-22]. Clearly, the proof of the pudding is in the eating.

The main difficulty here is *timing*. When should we conclude that a prophecy has failed? It took 25 years for God’s word concerning Isaac to be fulfilled. The birth of Jesus was prophesied thousands of years before it came to pass. It took 13 years from David’s anointment to his coronation as king. Therefore, our impatience could make us misjudge or misuse this criterion.

b) *The message must be consistent with Scriptures*

The word of God says, “If there arise among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, ‘Let us go after other gods’- which you have not known- ‘and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams *for the Lord your God is testing you to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul*” [Deut. 13: 1-3]. In other words, if

the message contradicts the word of God as recorded in the Scriptures, then it is not from God. It is a temptation of our faith.

Jesus refuted Satan's claim to be worshipped (on account of his authority over earthly kingdoms that he had shown Jesus in a vision) by quoting Scriptures when He said, "It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve'" [Lk 4: 7-8; Deut. 6: 13].

The main problem here is that a good number of us do not know enough Scriptures to discern between a lie and the truth. Moreover, there are other fine points that we cannot divide. For example, the same God who had commanded that no graven images be made of anything above, on or beneath the earth [Ex. 20: 4], was the same one who commanded Moses to make a brass serpent and put it on a post so that when those who had been bitten by snakes looked at it they became healed [Num. 21: 7-9]. How would Abraham know that the same God that had promised Isaac was the same one that later asked that he be sacrificed? We need to know more on the subject!

c) *The prophet hears by inspiration not divination*

In today's text, the word of God *came* to the prophet Jeremiah [Jer. 14: 1]. In other words, it is God that initiates the contact "for prophecy *never* came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke *as they were moved by the Holy Spirit*" [2 Pet. 1: 21]. Prophets hear by *inspiration*. On the other hand, fortune-tellers hear by *divination*. They initiate the contact with the spiritual world through incantations or cards or tricks or whatever.

One good test of this principle is that God chooses when to speak and who to speak to. For example, the captains of the forces of the remnants once came to the prophet Jeremiah to petition, "that the Lord your God may show us the way in which we should walk and the thing we should do." The prophet did not go into "Abracadabra" stunts! Instead, he assured them that he would pray according to their petition and whatever the Lord said, he would convey back to them. It took ten days for the word of God to come to Jeremiah and the message was not what the people wanted to hear [Jer. 42: 1-16]! Have you ever heard of any motivation speaker or fortune-teller who does not have a "good" answer on the spot each time you go to them?

d) *The prophet must be a vessel of honour*

Unless in exceptional cases when holy prophets are not available, such as the case of Balaam [Num. Chaps. 23-24], God hardly speaks through prophets who live in sin. This is because prophets hear by the Holy Spirit of God and our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit [1 Cor. 6: 19].

For example, hear what Jesus told John on the island of Patmos concerning the prophetess in the church in Thyatira, “because you allow that woman, Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality... and I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent (therefore), I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds” [Rev. 2: 20-22]. So, by their fruits we shall sift the prophets from the fortune-tellers.

4. Conclusion: The fortune-teller could be that prominent prophet(ess) in your church!

Ordinarily, a true believer will not go to professional palm readers or soothsayers who have set up shop to practise their trade. They will hardly go to pundits or *Alfas* or juju-doctors (the holy men of other faiths) to know about their future. To be able to walk by faith and not by sight, believers are likely to go to their places of worship and rely on what their prophets are saying because “surely the Lord God does nothing unless He (first) reveals His secret to His servants the prophets” [Amos 3: 7]. There lies the danger!

The Lord says, “the prophet who has a dream, let him tell a dream; and he who has My word, let him speak My word *faithfully*. What is the chaff to the wheat?” [Jer. 23: 28]. Some prophets are tempted by worldly gains to follow their own spirit [Ezek. 13: 3] or the ways of the fortune-teller and deceive the unwary that God is speaking through them. In today’s lesson, God has warned that prophets “who prophesy in My name, whom I did not send ... shall be consumed” and so shall the “people to whom they prophesy” [Jer. 14: 15, 16].

To the fortune-tellers who parade themselves as prophets in the house of God, your days are numbered. But to the true prophets, remain holy vessels at all times and be patient and wait for God to speak to you as and when He chooses. That way, you can neither deceive nor be deceived!