

Receiving a Personal Prophecy

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Paul believed in personal prophecy. He writes to Timothy about the prophecies he had received concerning his life and ministry for a specific purpose. He explains that they were given to help him be strong and faithful to his calling and to the gift God had imparted to him.

Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight.

1 Timothy 1:18

There is, then, a valid use of the gift of personal prophecy, but what do you do when someone gives one to you? How do you react? How do you know God is really speaking to you? How should you respond? How much weight should you attach to it?

There are three basic things to remember when you receive a personal prophecy: *test* the prophecy, and, if it is a genuine word, *receive* the prophecy, and then, *act* on it with prayer and wisdom.

Testing personal prophecy

We have already seen how we can test general prophetic words in chapter 13 of this book. But, as personal prophecy can only be finally judged by the person receiving it, it is good to look at some principles specifically relating to personal prophecy.

Remember the key text that shows we should not accept any prophecy at face value. We should carefully evaluate every prophetic claim, rejecting the elements that are not from the Lord and holding intently on to the good.

The Fivefold Ministry

Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.

1 Thessalonians 5:19-22

Test the messenger

This is particularly relevant for personal prophecy because, as previously mentioned, many false prophets operate at the periphery of church life looking for individuals they can 'prophecy' to, often for their own ends.

There are two key things to look for:

Accountability

Ask yourself the following questions: Is the person properly functioning under the care, nurture and discipline of church life, or are they a loose cannon? A lone ranger? A maverick? If they needed correction who would give it to them? Would they submit to it? Are they, in the end, unaccountable? Are they submissive to scripture? And, most important of all, 'Are they known to and trusted by your leaders?

Lifestyle

Jesus said of false prophets, "By their fruits you will know them" (Matthew 7:20). This fruit includes *character* – are they Christ-like in life and ministry practice? Their *doctrine* – is it orthodox and biblical? And, the fruit of their *ministry* – what are they producing in others? And, does it really benefit the kingdom of God?

Sometimes a prophecy may be accurate, but we still need to be cautious because the person who brings it is untrustworthy. In Matthew 7:15-23, we find false prophets able to prophesy (apparently accurately), cast out demons and do mighty works and yet they were rejected by Jesus. Caiaphas prophesied truthfully and yet he was not a follower of Christ (John 11:45-52). He probably prophesied out of his 'office' as High Priest at the Temple in Jerusalem, but that did not mean he was a trusted prophet of Christ. Balaam may

have been a pagan prophet, a false prophet or a backslidden prophet of the Lord. But, one thing is clear, he used pagan means of divination as he prophesied in the name of the Lord (See Numbers 22 – 24). God overthrew his pronouncements and turned his curse into a blessing for Israel. God is sovereign, but we must not tempt him by listening to people who are clearly not sent by him.

Test the message

Is the message factual?

If someone is truly speaking by the Holy Spirit they will bring an accurate word. The signs they announce will happen and their predictions will come to pass. But, don't be too pedantic about this. Prophecy is not verbally inspired in the same way that the scripture is. The Holy Spirit may be giving a core revelation for the person to interpret and pass on to you. Sometimes human elements creep in. Remember, the prophet may be developing his or her skills of receiving and delivering God's word to people. Talk about the discrepancies and be cautious, but do not demand infallibility.

On the other hand, do not assume that the prophecy is from God just because it is accurate. Be aware that supernaturally known facts do not in themselves constitute a prophecy. The information be coming from a demonic source. A true revelation from God contains more than accurate knowledge or information. A personal prophecy should reveal the heart of God and not just certain facts about a personal situation in your life.

Is the message biblical?

If the prophecy contains wrong doctrine, it cannot be the Holy Spirit speaking. All prophecy must submit to the standard of scripture (1 Corinthians 14:36-38). Do not confuse this test with expecting the prophecy to conform to your own theological bias. If in doubt, search the scriptures and ask your leaders for their input.

Check the witness of the Spirit

The Holy Spirit bears witness to true words of prophecy. You have the Holy Spirit in you. Ask yourself whether the Holy Spirit is bearing witness with your spirit that this is a true word from the Lord.

Make sure that what you think is a witness from the Holy Spirit is not just your own soulish reaction. Sometimes a prophecy may cut across your pre-conceived notions, your cherished ideas or your denominational tradition. In such circumstances, it is easy to say that the prophecy doesn't witness with you! On the other hand, the prophecy may excite you, flatter you or come from someone who has a great deal of charm and personal charisma. Do not confuse these soulish things with the genuine witness of the Spirit.

One of the ways the Holy Spirit will witness to your spirit is through the fruit of the Spirit. You can ask yourself whether the prophecy is consistent with these: love, joy, peace, and so on.

The confirmation test

I have mentioned before what I call the 'law of prophetic witness'. This follows the scriptural teaching that we should establish matters out of the mouth of two or three witnesses (Matthew 18:20 & 2 Corinthians 13:1). Prophetic ministry should not by-pass the normal process of decision-making. You need to check out the word you have received with wise counsellors and godly, mature leaders (Proverbs 15:22).

As you look for the prophetic witness, ask yourself the following questions:

- Is the prophecy consistent with the guidance you have already received from him?

Personal prophecy should for the most part be a confirmation of the things that the Lord has already been saying to you. You have the Holy Spirit and he speaks to you as well as to the prophet. Sometimes the Lord will give you new information for your life

through a personal prophecy. But, this will always be in line with what you know is God's overall plan for your life. If you receive something that does not fit into anything that you know, be careful. Do not reject it outright. Put it on one side. Seek advice and let the Lord clarify the situation for you.

- Does the prophecy attempt to bypass your responsibility in making your decisions?
- Does the prophecy avoid areas that are excessively personal - who you should go out with or what colour you should paint your house?
- Does the prophecy conform to the standards of sanctified common sense (1 Corinthians 14:33).
- What prophetic level is the prophet claiming to have?

Not all prophecies carry the same level of inspiration or authority. Sometimes a personal word is nothing more than inspired encouragement. At other times, it is a specific word of direction or correction. Sometimes, it touches on major issues of life and ministry. God almost always only entrusts such major words to experienced and mature prophetic people. This applies also to predictive prophecies and those with a specific time element. Most mistakes occur when people begin to prophesy outside the proportion of their faith or the gift that God has given them. Be careful with any prophecy that is apparently determining your future, your ministry and matters of the heart – such as marriage! Always check out the message with other mature believers and Christian leaders.

Receiving personal prophecy

Having tested the prophecy and seen that it is from the Lord, or, at least, that it contains valuable insights, do not forget to take steps to receive what God is saying to you.

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

James 1:22

James, of course is referring to the infallible word of scripture, but if God is speaking to you through a reliable and confirmed word of prophecy, you should listen to him. Just as in the parable of the sower, the seed of the word only bears fruit in good soil. The ground must be cultivated and the seed nurtured. Faith is necessary for the word to be effective in you. God said, "Believe the prophets and prosper!" (2 Chronicles 20:20). Learn to mix the prophetic word with faith.

For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith.

Hebrews 4:2

Record the word you have received – either in your spiritual journal or on an audio device. It helps you remember exactly what was prophesied. Sometimes a word will make greater sense to later on, when the timing of the prophecy matures. Recording a prophecy increases accountability both for the one prophesying and the one who receives the prophecy. It is easy to read into the prophecy things that were not said. The original prophecy can be easily forgotten and the record will refresh your memory.

Wage a good warfare through the word you have received. God does nothing without good reason. If he speaks to you through a personal word, you need to hold onto it and pray it through with faith and expectancy. Use the word God has given you and do battle with it according to 1 Timothy 1:18.

Remember the small print. There are no 'blank cheque' prophecies! It is best to assume all personal prophecies to be conditional, whether the condition was specifically mentioned in the original prophecy or not. We must remain faithful if we want to see his word fulfilled in our lives.

Act on the prophecy with wisdom, in dependence on the Holy Spirit and in keeping with every other Christian discipline including prayer and the study of scripture, Christian fellowship, and so on. Hold onto and work out what God has said to you in faithfulness and obedience. Do not neglect the gift he has imparted to you (1 Timothy 4:14). Keep the prophecy alive in your spirit (2 Timothy 1:1-7).

Make sure you are developing your own ability to listen to the Holy Spirit. That way, you will not only be better able to assess the prophetic words spoken over you, but you will also learn to hear God for yourself. The gift of prophecy is not given in order to override your own discipline of hearing from God.

In fact, one of the main functions of the prophetic ministry is to equip God's people with the skill to hear from God themselves. This is what we deal with in the following chapter.