

20th Century Bible Course

LESSON TWENTY-THREE

Dear Student:

What should you know when you encounter a prophet?

Moving across today's unsteady screen is a parade of prophets. Prophets in paperback. Prophets in hardback. Prophets in the news. Prophets in the darkened room. Prophets with crystal balls, or with vibrations, or with visions, or with Bibles, and all of them with predictions.

Predictions so many and so varied, so conflicting, so contradictory, that they would confuse a computer. How can a man sort them out? Should he listen to all? or to none? Or would it be a good idea to discover how to cross-examine a prophet?

What is a man to do? What is he to believe? Should he believe the one with the best batting average? But that keeps changing from year to year. Should he believe only those who quote from the Bible? But those who know nothing of the Bible sometimes seem to be right as often as those who quote from it liberally. Evidently that alone isn't a safe guideline.

The prediction game can be incredibly tricky. It can also be addictive. Several minor predictions come true on the nose. Then along comes a big one from the same source, and it fails. Why? People who watch the news and read the paperbacks are continually being impressed by short-range predictions that have come true--and by long-range predictions that haven't come true-yet!

Most frightening of all are the dates set for the end of the world. Prophets without Bibles call it a doomsday of some sort. Those with Bibles call it the second coming of Christ. But obviously every date set so far has passed without bringing the world to a sudden halt.

That we may not be deceived by the multitude of voices being heard in our world today, we shall especially concentrate on the characteristics of the genuine prophet according to the Word of God. A thorough knowledge of what a true prophet is like and what his messages are like will protect us from the most cleverly designed counterfeit.

Won't you first bow your head and ask the Holy Spirit to give you divine understanding as you prepare this lesson?

Most sincerely, Your Bible Instructor

LESSON 23

MODERN PROPHETS-COUNTERFEITS OR REAL?

SCRIPTURE READING: MATTHEW 7:13-29

Ever since sin placed a barrier between God and man, preventing face-to-face conversation, God has communicated with men through prophets (Amos 3:7). The Bible is the result of the gift of prophecy, for holy men wrote under the inspiration of God, recording His will and providing a charter of life for man (2 Peter 1:21).

When Christ was born in human flesh He communicated God to us (Hebrews 1:2). Before He ascended to heaven Jesus said, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28:20). He also promised the power of the Holy Spirit to aid His followers in presenting the gospel to all the world (Acts 1:8). The display of power at Pentecost converted thousands to the Christian "Way," as it was called. Without the Spirit the apostles were only a band of humble, confused, poorly educated, disillusioned men. With the Spirit they "turned the world upside down" with the gospel of saving grace (Acts 17:6).

Part 1--GIFT OF PROPHECY TO THE CHURCH

1. **How did Christ multiply the talents of the church? Ephesians 4:11** He gave the church _____

God gave these gifts according to the need of the church, not according to the demands or desires of its members. The gift of foreign languages gave the apostles instant communication with the throngs of foreigners gathered in Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost. The gift of prophecy was also part of the early church and helped to build up its faith and make it prosper.

2. **For what six purposes were the gifts of the Spirit given (verses 12-15)?**

- (1) "for the _____ of the saints."
- (2) "for the work of the _____."
- (3) "for the _____ [upbuilding] of the church."
- (4) to preserve "the _____ of the faith."
- (5) "that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and _____ by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive."
- (6) that we "may _____ into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ" (that is, for our Christian growth, or sanctification).

3. **Name some of the prophets in the early Christian church (in addition to the apostles):**

Acts 11:27, 28 _____
Acts 13:1 _____
Acts 15:32 _____
Acts 21:8, 9 _____

Are you surprised that women were included among those receiving the prophetic gift? Other prophetesses mentioned in the Bible are Miriam (Moses' sister), Deborah, Huldah, and Anna. God used both men and women as His spokesmen. The prophet Joel said of the last days, "Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy" (Acts 2:17-21).

4. **By what other name was a prophet known? 1 Samuel 9:9**

Paul compared the church to a body. The gifts (apostles, prophets, teachers, et cetera) function in the church just as do the ears, eyes, nose and mouth, in our body (1 Corinthians 12:12-28). The prophets are the "see-ers," or eyes of the church. Evidently many churches are "blind churches," for they lack the gift of prophecy.

5. **What happens when one blind person tries to lead another blind person? Matthew 15:14**

A blind man stood at an intersection in Newark, New Jersey, waiting for someone to help him cross the street. He felt a tug at his sleeve. "Going across?" a voice asked.

"Yes," replied the blind man, as he took the arm of his unseen benefactor. Suddenly catastrophe struck! The other man was also blind.

Long ago the wise man noted that "where there is no vision, the people perish" (Proverbs 29:18). God's counsel comes through loud and clear: "Believe in the Lord your God, so shall ye be established; believe his prophets, so shall ye prosper" (2 Chronicles 20:20).

Part 2-- THE GIFT OF PROPHECY IN THE LAST DAYS

1. **How long were the gifts of the Spirit to remain in the church? Ephesians 4:13**

Thought question: Have Christ's followers attained this unity yet? _____
When do you think Christians will reach the measure of perfection found in Jesus? _____

2. What was promised those who wait for Christ's return? 1 Corinthians 1:5-7

It mentions here that "the testimony of Christ," was to be confirmed in them. Let us see what relationship this has to prophecy.

3. What two characteristics does God's "remnant" people have? Revelation 12:17 They will keep the _____, and have the _____.

4. What is the "testimony of Jesus"? Revelation 19:10 _____

When Peter spoke of the Old Testament prophets testifying "beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow," he specifically stated that this knowledge was given them through the "Spirit of Christ" (1 Peter 1:10-12). In every sense of the word, the Holy Spirit is the "Spirit of Christ," whether His work was done in Old or New Testament times, or whether it is in the end of time before Jesus returns. All the gifts are to remain with the church until Jesus returns. They were given to guide and strengthen believers as long as they were exposed to the attacks of Satan in this world.

Part 3--TRUE AND FALSE PROPHETS

The antique dealer rubbed his finger over the label inside the violin case. "Stradivarius!" he exclaimed. "Why, this must be worth a fortune!" He had been rummaging among the contents of an old attic, looking for treasures. Now he felt a tingle of excitement as he shut the violin case and drove to the home of a musician friend. "What do you say this is worth?" he asked. The musician looked it over carefully, drew the bow across the strings, and played a few bars of music. "I'd say it was worth about five dollars," he said. "You must be mistaken! Look at the label -it's a Stradivarius!" "It takes more than a label to make a Stradivarius," the musician replied.

1. What may we expect in the last days? Matthew 24:24

2. Why are we not to believe every spirit? 1 John 4:

Would Jesus warn us against false prophets if there were no true prophets? No one takes the trouble to counterfeit something that does not exist. That's why we don't see any \$13 bills floating around. Would God ask us to test those who claim to be prophets if there were no true prophets? No. He would simply tell us to ignore all prophets.

3. By what are we to check all claims? Isaiah 8:20 They must agree with the _____ of God and the _____ of Scripture.

The Scriptures comprise the Old and New "Testaments." Anything or anyone that disagrees with or contradicts in any way God's ten commandments or the word of His other spokesmen-the prophets who wrote the Bible-cannot be from God.

4. What characterized the messages of Christ, the greatest Prophet this world has ever had? Matthew 7:29 _____

Watch for the note of uncertainty that almost always characterizes a false prophet--vague pronouncements, frequent use of words such as *maybe*, *perhaps*, *probably*, or *I think*. The messages of a true prophet will always come through clear and positive. The young prophet Daniel stood before King Nebuchadnezzar with no uncertainty in either his manner or message: "Thou, O king, sawest. . .," he declared. Then when he finished he boldly declared, "The dream is certain, and the interpretation thereof sure" (Daniel 2:31,45). Not only will false prophets reveal signs of uncertainty; they often change their minds. Not so with God. "I am the Lord, I change not" (Malachi 3:6).

5. How else may we test a prophet? Matthew 7:20 _____

We can recognize a false prophet by the kind of life he lives. Is he a law-abiding, moral, upright

person-one respected in his community as a good neighbor and a fine Christian? Many so-called prophets fail this test. Since God's reputation is at stake in the life of His prophet, it is unthinkable that He would select a person of questionable character.

6. If a prophet sets a date for Christ's second coming, is he true or false? Matthew 24:36
Why?

Which brings us to predictions in general. As you read God's Word, what kind of messages did the prophets give? Almost unanimously they called the people to repent of their evil ways. Courageously they stood before kings and commoners, captains and peasants, with messages of rebuke and condemnation. Sometimes they were bidden to predict the downfall of their own nation! Many a prophet forfeited his life because his message did not please the authorities. God also sent messages of encouragement through the prophets.

But what of most "prophets" today? Their typical concern seems to be with short-range predictions such as assassinations, suicides, and plane crashes. Rarely, if ever, do they call for repentance, or a return to the principles of God's Word. Why is this? Why do they not predict the stately march of events as the Bible prophets frequently did?

The reason is found in the source of their predictions. Counterfeit messages and predictions, however transmitted, originate with the enemy of God. And suicides, bridge disasters, train wrecks, et cetera, are events which Satan can often manipulate and control. So he predicts these, helps to engineer them, and then uses his successes to make people believe he has complete knowledge of the future-*which he does not have at all*.

7. If a prophet's prediction fails to come to pass, what may we know? Deuteronomy 18:21, 22

A true prophet's predictions will *never* fail. No allowance is permitted for even one mistake! The reason is not hard to see. God claims to know the end from the beginning. He stakes His whole reputation on His unfailing ability to know the future. If one prophecy fails, how could we be certain another might not also fail?

It is not always easy to ascertain the "fruits" of a prophet's life, or to check how closely his beliefs hold to the Bible. But no false prophet can maintain a 100 percent batting average very long. Sooner or later a prediction fails. He may humbly admit that this was not God's fault, but rather his own faulty interpretation of God's message. God says not to heed this alibi, for when He speaks, the prophecy will *never fail-not even once!*

Let us review the tests of a true prophet. If someone claims this gift but fails to pass even one of these criteria, we may be certain he is a counterfeit in sheep's clothing.

1. **Matthew 7:20** "By their fruits ye shall know them."
2. **1 John 4:1-3** If they do not believe Jesus came in human flesh, they are not genuine prophets.
3. **Deuteronomy 18:21, 22; Jeremiah 28:9** Every prediction must come to pass; one failure labels the prophet a counterfeit.
4. **Isaiah 8:20** Their messages and beliefs must harmonize with the law of God and the testimony of the Scriptures.
5. **Their messages** will be serious, will call people back to God and His Word, will rebuke sin and wrongdoing, and in general will build up the church. The trivial, the spectacular, or that which is unrelated to a person's spirituality, do not tally in content or tone with the messages given by true prophets.

8. If a prophet appears who passes all these tests, what should be our attitude?

1 Thessa-Ionians 5:20, 21

Part 4-- A TRUE PROPHET

We have learned that the gift of prophecy is available to the church until the end of time. The warning against false prophets in the last days serves notice that the true exists. The counsel to test all who claim to have this gift would be totally irrelevant were there to be no true prophet or prophets.

We have also the sure Word of God that His remnant people may be identified by two special characteristics: they will (1) keep God's commandments, and (2) have the gift, or Spirit of prophecy (see Questions 3 and 4 of Section 2). That we live in the last days no Bible student will dispute. The question may legitimately be asked, Has any prophet appeared in modern times who has passed all these tests? The answer is Yes.

In the year 1827 Ellen Gould Harmon, later Mrs. James White, was born in Gorham, Maine. She accepted Christ as her Saviour at an early age. When William Miller, the great second advent preacher, spoke in her church, she, with her family, accepted his teachings, earnestly expecting Jesus to come in 1844.

Following the disappointment of 1844, the Millerite movement disintegrated. In December of 1844, at a prayer meeting, Ellen received the first of many visions that continue to encourage the church, strengthen its faith, and light its pathway to this day.

Ellen White was also a wife and mother, rearing a family of sons. Her husband was a prominent writer, leader, and minister. Her great goal in life was to encourage holy living in the believers and to announce the return of Christ to the world.

What was her attitude toward the Bible? She considered herself a "lesser light to lead men and women to the greater light [the Bible]." "I recommend to you, dear reader," she wrote, "the Word of God as the rule of your faith and practice."

Her knowledge of health principles was years ahead of her time. Long before modern science confirmed it, she warned of the dangers of smoking. Long before the cholesterol problem was known, she urged the use of vegetable oils rather than animal fats. She warned against drug abuse. In a world where fresh air was shunned, she counseled exercise in the outdoors. Long before the electron microscope offered confirmation of the virus-like cause of some cancers, she wrote of cancer "germs." This counsel has given those who follow it comparative freedom from some of the ailments that plague modern man. Researchers confirm that on the average, Seventh-day Adventists live several years longer than non-Adventists, have less heart disease, circulatory ailments and certain types of cancer.

Her books lead one closer to Christ and develop a deeper love for the Bible. Read *Steps to Christ*, *Desire of Ages*, or *Christ's Object Lessons*, and see for yourself why thousands have been brought to Christ by the inspired writings of this messenger of God.

At her death in 1915 the New York *Independent* commented, "In all this [the rise and expansion of the Seventh-day Adventists] Ellen G. White has been the inspiration and guide. Here is a noble record, and she deserves great honor. . . . She was absolutely honest in her belief in her revelations. Her life was worthy of them. She showed no spiritual pride and she sought no filthy lucre. She lived the life and did the work of a worthy prophetess."

Today her messages and influence live on, perhaps stronger than ever.