

Prophets And Prophecy (Part 1)

What Is a Prophet?

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We will begin this sermon in Revelation 19.

Revelation 19:9-10 And he said unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb. And he said unto me, These are the true sayings of God. And I fell at his feet to worship him, and he said unto me, See you do it not: I am your fellow servant, and of your brethren that have the testimony of Jesus: worship God: for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.

I began here because prophecy plays a very large part in our lives, and so no Christian ought be without an understanding of more than just the bare basics. In this verse it lets us know that Jesus' message—the gospel—is not only prophetic, but it is the *essence* of all biblical prophecy.

The word "testimony" means "the statement given by a witness to an event." It is both frequently associated with someone who is on trial in a court, but it does not have to be limited to that. Newspapers give accounts of what people said of some event that occurred that is of interest to others.

Jesus' statement—the gospel—is the message He preached during His lifetime. It is that message around which all other prophecy revolves. It is prophecy's *heart and core*. That is what the word *spirit* means. In this place it means the *essence*—the heart and core of that. Therefore, anybody looking forward to Christ's return—and that is us—should have more than merely a casual interest in prophecy. Most of us pay more attention to the prophecy than to the prophet. This is as it should be, but on the other hand let us look at what it says in Ephesians 2.

Ephesians 2:19-20 Now therefore you [meaning the brethren] are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God: And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone.

The church is built upon the apostles and the prophets and the words they wrote. They not only prophesied (that is, foretold events), but they also gave the most accurate accounts of ancient history. Besides that, they gave us a great deal of the doctrine, the teachings we believe and after which we pattern our lives.

Most of us are unaware that the first person who is *named* a prophet is Abraham. Abraham was named a prophet in Genesis 20. This took place during the time Abimelech was being instructed by God regarding Sarah, to return her to Abraham, and so God counseled Abimelech to do the following.

Genesis 20:7 Now therefore restore the man his wife; for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for you, and you shall live: and if you restore her not, know you that you shall surely die, you, and all that are yours.

Abraham is the first person directly named as a prophet, but he is chronologically *not* the first person the Bible shows prophesying. The first person the Bible shows actually prophesying is Enoch. It does not report on this until way back in the book of Jude.

Jude 14 And Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these, saying, Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of his saints.

Here we have Enoch, before the flood, prophesying of the return of Jesus Christ, and His return with the saints. We have Abraham as the first *named* prophet, and we have Enoch, who was a prophet, and the first one actually *shown* prophesying, but it is not reported until all the way back in the book of Jude.

Today we are going to begin what I think will be a 2-part series indirectly associated with "The Beast" series. We are going to be taking a look at some of what the Bible says about prophets primarily. We will not be looking into any individual personality, but we will be looking at the body of prophets and what they did, and what was required of them. That is going to take up the first sermon.

With the second sermon I plan to get into one particular period of time in which there was almost literally an explosion of prophets God sent to the nation of Israel. We will look at what they said, because what they said during that period of time has very direct and great bearing upon what we are going through right now in our lives as part of the church of God. That period of time is exceedingly important to us in *our* time, and thus I think we can broaden the scope of our understanding of what God is working out in our generation.

Exodus 4:10-16 And Moses said unto the LORD, O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since you have spoken unto your servant: but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue. And the LORD said unto him, Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? Have not I the LORD? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth, and teach you what you shall say. And he said, O my Lord, send, I pray you, by the hand of him whom you will send. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses, and he said, Is not Aaron the Levite your brother? I know that he can speak well. And also, behold, he comes forth to meet you: and when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart. And you shall speak unto him, and put words in his mouth: and I will be with your mouth, *and* with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do. And he shall be your spokesman unto the people: and he shall be, even he shall be to you instead of a mouth, and you shall be to him instead of God. And you shall take this rod in your hand, wherewith you shall do signs.

The Old Testament uses three words that are translated into the English words "prophet" or "seer." Transliterated, these three Hebrew words are *nabi*, *roeh*, and *hozeh*.

Nabi literally means "to bubble up." It describes one who is stirred up in spirit. This is the word which is the one most frequently used by the Hebrew writers. When the sense of "bubbling up" is applied to speaking, it becomes "to announce" or "to call" or "to declare." Hence, a *nabi*, or a prophet, is an announcer—one who pours forth the declarations of God.

Roeh means literally "to see" or "to perceive." It is generally used to describe one who is a revealer of secrets; one who envisions.

Hozeh also means "to see" or "to perceive," but this one is even used in reference to musicians. You might see that from time to time, that so-and-so, who is named as a musician, was a *seer*. It is also used to indicate a person who was a counselor or an advisor to a king. If you were reading through the Hebrew, it would not necessarily give you the indication that the person was a prophet, but rather an advisor—someone who had wisdom, and thus advised. It means "one who has insight."

When the translators were translating, they tried to indicate whether the message was spiritual. If it was spiritual, then they tended to translate it "prophet." If it did not give any indication of being spiritually generated, then they would put "advisor" or "counselor," even though it was exactly the same word.

In the Greek language, a prophet is simply "one who speaks for another"—one who speaks for a god, and so interprets the god's will to the people. Hence, the essential meaning in Greek is "interpreter."

Nobody knows whether God intends that any real difference be understood from the usage of the different words, but usage in the Bible is more important than etymology. In the context of these scriptures it defines a prophet about as well as can be. The conclusion is this: A prophet is one who speaks for another. He is a representative who carries a message. He is an expounder of God's Word.

Overall, the Bible's usage conforms most closely to the Greek usage, that a prophet is one who speaks for another. As we will see, it is not limited to God. In this situation, Moses' and Aaron's relationship is analogous to God's and Moses'.

Moses is quite instructive in regard to our feelings about ourselves. We say, "What can I do? I'm so weak. I have no abilities." Moses said, "I am not a man of words." Was he not already justifying himself? He said, "I am heavy of mouth and tongue." This is not exactly stammering, as some believe, but he is saying that he did not have a gift of speech. He means that he did not have it by nature, and that he did not have it developed within him since God began speaking to him. This is the same man about whom Stephen, who was defending himself against the Jews in Acts 7, said the following:

Acts 7:22 And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and in deeds.

Is there a contradiction here? No, there is not. Both Moses and Stephen were correct. Moses was correct about himself. He did not have the gift of speaking, and he was not an eloquent man. Stephen was also correct. This is showing us that the power, the effectiveness in Moses' words was not in Moses himself but was in what God added to the words that came out of Moses' mouth. It was God who made the impact on the hearer's mind.

I would have to guess, to speculate, that in one sense this was never really overcome in Moses, that he was not eloquent as men would count eloquence. But yet what he said had awesome power because of God being *in* what he said. And so both men were correct—Moses about himself and Stephen seeing it from his perspective. Moses really said powerful things because God added to what Moses actually said. We have to remember this.

I said this is instructive to you and to me because we are much the same way. We tend to say, "Who am I?" "What can I do?" The answer is that God has called the weak of the world, and we really do not have very much to offer Him except our lives, and that we are willing to be used. He adds where we lack, and that is what makes the difference. He says He does this so that no man can glory in His presence. God intends this be something that humbles us. We need to recognize that it is God who gives the increase to the effectiveness of what we say and what we do.

Moses undoubtedly had ideas from his upbringing in Egypt, which were as good as a person could receive at that time. He had ideas about what a leader should be like. He probably thought that a hero needed to be some kind of a blazing person (like we might think) who commanded peoples' attention, who was good-looking, and had everything going for him.

We understand that God does not call many mighty in that regard, that God uses the weak, and He is going to glorify Himself in what is going on. So Moses did not yet recognize that since this was going to be a work of God, the focus was going to be on God, and what He supplied would always be sufficient for the task. Remember that, because learning and keeping our place in God's scheme of things is a very hard lesson for us to learn.

As you can see, in verse 14 God became angry at Moses' resistance, but really at Moses' unbelief is what it amounts to. God's promise to be with him did not mean that Moses would suddenly become eloquent and fluent. We have to understand that God knows how to use His creatures. He will use them to His end. If a man has great resources, his sufficiency makes God unnecessary, and he becomes puffed up. So God makes clear, through Paul, that He purposely calls the weak for His end.

Let us go to Exodus 7, because the story goes on.

Exodus 7:1 And the LORD said unto Moses, See, I have made you a god to Pharaoh: and Aaron your brother shall be your prophet.

This is what I mean when I said this is not limited to God and men, but also takes place from one man to another. Aaron was Moses' prophet, and Moses was God's prophet.

Exodus 7:2 You shall speak all that I command you: and Aaron your brother shall speak unto Pharaoh, that he send the children of Israel out of his land.

What is beginning to become clear here is that the prophet is a message-carrier from one of greater authority. In this case Moses was in the position of God to Aaron, and Moses thus was also in the position of God to Pharaoh.

By combining Exodus 4 with Exodus 7, the biblical usage of a prophet has a good foundation. It begins to become clear that a prophet is one who expresses the will of God in words, and sometimes with signs given to confirm what was said.

It is through Moses that the function of a prophet begins to become clearly established. Their function was basically to cry aloud and show men their sins. It does not stop there though, because as we will see as we go along, they were also pastors and ministerial monitors of the peoples' conduct and attitudes. Their function differed from that of priests in that the priest approached God on behalf of the people by means of sacrifice. This is in contrast to the prophets who approached *men* as ambassadors of God, beseeching men to turn from their evil ways, and live.

The difference between a prophet and a priest is a matter of direction, in that one goes from God to man, and the other goes from men to God. The priest goes from men to God. The prophet goes from God to men. It is a matter of direction and *directness*. The priest is indirect; the prophet is direct. We have things going in opposite directions here, yet both working to accomplish essentially the same thing, which is to bring man and God into a relationship with one another. This has direct application to us under the New Covenant. I want you to go back to II Corinthians 5 where Paul makes a very interesting statement in this regard about the New Covenant ministry.

II Corinthians 5:20 Now then we are ambassadors for Christ.

That word "ambassadors" is key here. Remember I said to you that the prophet is God's ambassador that He sends. He goes from God to men, and so the prophet is an ambassador from God to men. The ministers are ambassadors for Christ. We go from God to men. We are not in the position of a priest.

II Corinthians 5:20-21 Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us. [That is exactly what a prophet did. He beseeched the people to repent.] We pray you in Christ's stead, be you reconciled to God. [That is what a prophet does.] For he has made him [Christ] to be sin for us who knew no sin: that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

Within the New Testament ministry there is a strong element of the work of a prophet, and a very, almost by comparison, weak element of the work of a priest who is seen as an intercessor between God and men, going in the opposite direction. The priest goes from men to God.

The office of prophet then was not merely to foretell the future (which was actually in a way secondary), but to *forth tell* with power and exposition the application of the law, which is the declaration of God's will. God's will is expressed through the law; thus the prophet's function has two elements: (1) moral and doctrinal, and (2) predictive.

To most, the predictive is the more important, but it is no more important than the other part which has to do with the morality of the people. Within their prophecies is an understanding of history that shows meaning only in terms of a sovereign, loving, and holy God's purpose and participation. Outside of that, they are meaningless. Man's history is always shown to be moving in the direction of that purpose, which is the only perspective from which the prophecies can be understood. This is why the world gets so screwed up in interpreting the prophecies.

The ones who do the better job in interpreting the prophecies are those who are looking forward to the return of Jesus Christ, and this would generally tend to be the evangelical groups. They do a better job at interpreting the prophecies because they have a tendency to look at them as moving in that direction. In those groups which are really liberal in their thinking, prophecy becomes virtually meaningless to them. They seem to do all in their power to subvert the intention of those prophecies and say that they were already fulfilled. They do that kind of thing. The liberal Protestant groups seem to be in that category.

Prophecy is not intended to open the future just to idle curiosity, but for the greater purpose of furnishing guidance to God's people, to give encouragement, hope, confidence, and to instill urgency in the heirs of salvation.

We will now go back to the Old Testament once again, to Deuteronomy 18.

Deuteronomy 18:15-18 The LORD your God will raise up unto you a Prophet from the midst of you, of your brethren, like unto me: unto him you shall hearken: According to all that you desire of the LORD your God in Horeb in the day of the assembly, saying, Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, neither let me see this great fire any more, that I die not. And the LORD said unto me, They have well spoken that which they have spoken. I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto you, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him.

The important thing for us right here is the association of the word "prophet" with the phraseology "I will put My words in his mouth." That is exactly what He told Moses He would do, and so we can see a chain there—from God to Moses, from Moses to Aaron, from Aaron to Pharaoh, or from Aaron to the people.

Contrary to what it shows you in *The Ten Commandments* movie, I would get from the Bible that it was Aaron who did the bulk of the speaking before the people, rather than Moses. This does not mean that Moses was excluded from speaking to the people, because eventually, even though he never, as far as I am able to see, overcame his lack of eloquence he complained of, he nonetheless became secure in his position as the leader. As the forty-year trial went on, he more and more spoke directly to the people. I am sure that when they finally got out away from Pharaoh, Moses did the bulk of the speaking before the people, and Aaron faded into the background in that regard.

Every other prophet, except Christ, only built on the foundation that was laid in Moses. These verses particularly foretell of Christ, but in principle it applies to all of the prophets that followed Moses, because all of those prophets were spoken to by God, and they in turn did the same thing Moses did. They delivered the message to the ones the message was to go to.

Prophets have been, until New Testament times, God's way of reaching the people. Whenever the people needed a prophet—we might even say a mediator with God, just like He said here in verses 16 and 17—God would raise one up and put His words in the prophet's mouth.

We are going to go to verse 9 of Deuteronomy 18, and you will begin to see that virtually this whole chapter deals with prophets and prophecy.

Deuteronomy 18:9-14 When you are come into the land which the LORD your God gives you, you shall not learn to do after the abominations of those nations. There shall not be found among you any one that makes his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that uses divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer, for all that do these things are an abomination unto the LORD: and because of these abominations the LORD your God does drive them out from before you. You shall be perfect with the LORD your God. For these nations which you shall possess hearkened unto observers of times, and unto diviners: but as for you, the LORD your God has not suffered [allowed] you so to do.

Man has a powerful urge to explore the future and to know what the will of God is, but he has to resist the impulse for satisfaction apart from what God says. All of these are heathen ways of scanning the future, and through these means men have sought knowledge and the power of God, or

gods, to serve their own ends. There is some disagreement in commentaries and Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias as to the precise meaning of some of these terms, but I will give it my best shot, because people are still using them to this day. It seems that things like this never end.

Divination

Divination is the casting of lots. (This is one that most are in agreement with.)

An Observer of times

An observer of times is one who makes predictions from the reading of clouds, and even on such things as the play of light on water. We know as ripples go across something, the image in the water changes somewhat, especially if the water is moving as well, and these people claim to interpret what those visions they see in the water mean.

Enchanter

An enchanter is signified as one who hisses and/or whispers, and frequently also charms serpents. (You can figure this one out for yourself. What hissing or whispering means, I do not know.)

A Witch

A witch is noted as one who makes use of drugs and herbs. At other times and places, witches are called sorcerers. They are associated with the making of magic, and so they put on a show, and then also make predictions as well.

A charmer

A charmer is a person who ties knots. Nobody knows how charmers work, but that is what the word indicates: a person who ties knots. (Maybe they tie people into knots, mystifying them with what they are saying. I do not know.)

A Consulter

A consulter is one who holds a séance and consults a spirit medium. (This is one that is really modern and up-to-date. Almost all the New Age religions use this. They do channeling. They are conferring with a spirit medium.)

A wizard

A wizard is one who claims wisdom from other than a human source. He is directly dealing with a demon.

A Necromancer

A necromancer is one who asks of the dead. He is similar to the spiritist and the consulter.

All of these are forms of idolatry, because the true God is not sought. The reason these things are a danger is because there is no reality, no absolutes, no law of God at their base.

The reason I went through this is because with a true prophet, he never loses sight of the law of God. The law of God is his proof of who he is, apart from signs that God permits him to give, but he never strays away from the law of God. That is an absolute. These others are idols because there is no reality. There are no absolutes tied to the predictions they are making. The person who seeks the will of God through these means is at the mercy of lying demons and imaginative men and women.

The prophecies of the Bible will deal in four basic areas:

A local situation.

There will be a local or an immediate situation that the prophet and the people will find themselves in. The keys words there are "local" and "immediate."

Events related to the Messiah.

Historical events of the remote future.

These are events which are *way off* in the future. The remote one will be either the Messiah, Israel, the Church, or the Kingdom of God.

Events that are dual in application.

This is the one I think that we in the church have the most problem with. We are most likely to go off the beam on those events that are dual in application. In other words, this one deals with #1 and #3 at the same time: dealing with a local and an immediate situation, and at the same time there is a direct connection to something that is going to happen way off in the future.

We are going to back now to Deuteronomy 13.

Deuteronomy 13:1-5 If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder come to pass whereof he spake unto you, saying, Let us go after other gods which you have not known, and let us serve them: You shall not hearken unto the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams: for the LORD your God proves [tests] you, to now whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall walk after the LORD your God, and fear him, and keep his commandments, and obey his voice, and you shall serve him, and cleave unto him, and that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death; because he has spoken to turn you away from the LORD your God, which brought you out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed you out of the house of bondage, to thrust you out of the way which the LORD your God commanded you to walk in. So shall you put the evil away from the midst of you.

It is a prophetic voice that speaks for God, and these prophets will always have at the base of their prophecy the commandments of God as evidence. The message they give (predictive or whatever) must always be in harmony with previously revealed truth even though the prophet may be breaking new doctrinal ground. That happens every once in a while.

We can begin to see another difference between the prophet and a priest or a minister. The priest or the minister conserves old truth, and implements new truth given by the prophet. Did you hear what I said? Most of the time new truth will come through a prophet. Now I said *most of the time*, because under the New Covenant new truth came through apostles who were about as close to a prophet as you can get, but they were not prophets. Paul makes that clear when he listed the offices in the church, and he listed apostles first, and prophets second.

Once we leave the Old Covenant and go into the New Covenant, God instead used apostles to bring new truth, and the prophet was moved into a secondary position to the apostle. But all the way through the Old Testament, the new truth, the new doctrines, came through prophets.

A minister's job, and my job as a minister, is to conserve what has already been given. I am supposed to be conservative, to hold fast to what was given in the past, but I am also supposed to recognize that new truth comes through an apostle. There is no apostle, and so I do not expect that there will be any new truth. But if God raises up a prophet, then we also have to recognize that new truth can come through a prophet. He will not break that pattern. New truth will either come through an apostle or a prophet. The prophet breaks new ground, but he also conserves the old.

There is a difference between a minister and a prophet. A minister does not give new truth. He conserves old truth. The prophet or the apostle will conserve the old, and also give new.

I Samuel 3:1 And the child Samuel ministered unto the LORD before Eli. And the word of the LORD was precious in those days; there was no open vision.

The word "precious" is being used in the sense of "rare." Things that are rare are precious. They of course are also valuable.

I think the sense of this is that the priesthood at that time was speaking without inspiration. There was "no open vision." They were speaking without inspiration. Their messages carried no moral authority, because God was not with them.

If you are familiar at all with the opening parts of the book of Samuel, you will begin to understand that Eli was not a very good priest. His sons were even worse. There was no vision. There was no open truth really, because the people were not hearing the inspired Word of God. The people were no longer positively affected by the ceremonies that were being performed by a decadent priesthood, and so through Samuel God raised up a new moral power to correct the situation.

This does not seem to be in any way a systemized way of succession from one prophet to another. Each prophet received his office directly from God by appointment. There is another distinction there between a true prophet of God and a priest, even if that priest spoke under the inspiration of God. A prophet was somebody *directly* appointed by God, whereas a priest received his office simply because he was a son, a descendant of Aaron.

The classic prophet was a man who approves of the way of God to the Israelites, but he tended to be outside the established system. That begins to become very clear from Samuel on.

We are going to go now to Isaiah 58 to back up what I said a little bit earlier.

Isaiah 58:1 Cry aloud, spare not, lift up your voice like a trumpet, and show my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins.

This was a prophet's major responsibility. But again, if you read rightly in the Bible, you will also find prophets who are called "watchmen," and prophets who are called "man of God." They are also called pastors, but in each case there is either some strong, weak, subtle, or whatever indication that they were somebody set apart from the normal system, even if they happened to be a priest.

Jeremiah was a priest. Ezekiel was a priest, but you read both of those books, and even though those men were priests, they were not part of the system. They stood apart from it even though they were of Aaron's family. It was what God did in setting them apart that made them recognizable to the people as "a man of God," as their "watchman."

Although there are periods of time in the biblical record that there appears to be gaps, I believe that until the New Testament times there were almost always prophets. Most of the commentators say that the last Old Testament prophet was John the Baptist. Even though he appears in the New Testament, he was still operating under the Old Covenant. His father Zechariah was a priest, and even though John the Baptist came from a priestly family, he was very definitely different from the priests of that day. He stood out like a sore thumb. Always remember that, because it is an identifying mark. Even though a prophet may be a priest, he is definitely not part of the priesthood system.

The prophets whose writings make up much of the biblical record tend to appear just prior to a time of crisis, or during the crisis itself. Sometimes they were well organized, as in Samuel's day. It even says that there was a school of the prophets. However, just from my own study, these schools of the prophets I think really tended to be not prophets of the classic sense, like Samuel, or Jeremiah, or Ezekiel, or Isaiah, but rather they were simply men who were going to a theological seminary. They were very likely mostly from the family of Aaron, and part of their priesthood training was to go to these schools. There is no doubt that some of these spoke under the inspiration of God, but they were not prophets in the same sense as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Malachi, and others.

Sometimes their ministry was accompanied by tremendous miracles, as with Elijah and Elisha. These signs and miracles were used as reinforcement to their ministry from God. At other times, as with John the Baptist, there were no miracles at all. In other words, what I am saying here is there is no one pattern in regard to this, except that they were men set apart.

We are going to go to I Kings 18 and look in on Elijah, because after Samuel the next great prophet was Elijah.

I Kings 18:17-18 And it came to pass, when Ahab saw Elijah, that Ahab said unto him, Art you he that troubles Israel? And he answered, I have not troubled Israel, but you, and your father's house, in that you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD, and you have followed Baalim.

There is his base: the Ten Commandments; the law. Elijah is declaring himself as one sent from God.

I Kings 18:19-21 Now therefore send, and gather to me all Israel unto mount Carmel, and the prophets of Baal four hundred and fifty, and the prophets of the groves four hundred, which eat at Jezebel's table. [That is, they owe their sustenance to her.] So Ahab sent unto all the children of Israel, and gathered the prophets together unto mount Carmel. And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt you between two opinions? If the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word.

I Kings 18:36 And it came to pass at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice that Elijah the prophet came near, and said, [Notice this simple prayer:] LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all those things at your word.

I Kings 18:39 And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces: and they said, The LORD, he is the God, the LORD, he is the God.

Elijah is quite instructive here. He came into a time of immediate crisis, and one that was going to get far worse before it ever got better. There was tremendous evil to overcome. This was about 150 years before Israel was to fall and become the Lost Ten Tribes, so God was beginning to make a powerful witness before that occurred. Here is God's pattern being established. He begins to send somebody long before the real crisis actually occurs. A crisis is building. A crisis is occurring, but the prophet comes along before it reaches its peak. Elijah's work was to reveal the true God to Israel in a time of growing national crisis.

Notice Elijah says *disturbing things*. This is a prophet's job. He says disturbing things, and that is the *hallmark of a prophet of God*. We have to understand that people like to feel comfortable. You like to feel comfortable. I like to feel comfortable. The only trouble is we like to feel comfortable in moral mediocrity. We want to be "settled on our lees," as it says in another place in the prophets.

The prophet comes along, and he troubles people because he awakens them and makes them feel guilty concerning their relationship with God and each other. He awakens them to their spiritual and moral responsibility. These people were lethargic as far as true spiritual things were concerned.

I have read that when a person is freezing to death he feels a pleasant numbness he does not want to end. The person just goes to sleep as he is freezing to death. But when heat is applied, and the blood begins rushing into the affected areas, *pain* immediately occurs. The pain, brethren, is indicative of rescue and cure. God sends a prophet to people who are *cold* in their relationship with God—maybe we might say freezing to death—and they want to stay that way. The prophet turns the heat on, and they get mad at him when he is working to make them better; but it troubles. There is pain there.

A prophet does not live in a happy situation. I think that if you have read through some of the prophets' lives you would see this. Maybe the most clear in this regard is Jeremiah, who moaned and complained to God, "This is more difficult than You ever told me it would be. You tricked me." He did not like it. He wanted people to like him. That is understandable, but he was still faithful, and he did his job. But he was in trouble his whole life, from the time he was a teenager on.

There are several ideas as to exactly what Elijah said here ("How long halt you between two opinions?"). One of them goes like this: "How long are you going to hop from branch to branch?" See, just like a bird going from branch to branch. The bird cannot make up its mind as to where it wants to settle down. It just keeps hopping around.

Another said it is the shifting of weight from one foot to the other, indicating some degree of lameness.

There is a third one where they said he is describing somebody teetering on a tightrope and trying to maintain his balance.

There is no doubt about his intent. "How long will you keep hopping or shifting from one opinion to the other?" Their spiritual lethargy for the true God made them uncommitted. This is what he was concerned about. Their commitment went one way, and then it went the other way.

Once Elijah began preaching, their conscience pricked them, and it encouraged them to worship the true God. But their carnality and their fear of men persuaded them to worship Baal, because they wanted to be friends with all these people. They were straddling the fence in a very precarious state of imbalance, attempting to combine the worship of God with the more popular worship of Baal and Asherah. This is typical Israelitish syncretism, but it will not work.

I remember reading in the book, *A Stillness of Appomattox* (Bruce Catton's work on the Civil War). At one point in the book he was dealing with soldiers who left the service of the army that they were in—either the Confederate Army or the Union Army—and they would go over to the other side and surrender themselves in order to be given a bit of favor and put into prison. In exchange for that, they would offer information about their unit. For awhile both sides—the Confederate and the Union—accepted those people and took their information.

Before the war was over, both sides were summarily executing anybody who did that. Bang! They were dead. Do you know why they did this? It was because those soldiers could not be trusted. Either one of them. The information they gave turned out to be mostly wrong. It turned out to be lies. They were just saving themselves and being comfortable in the situation, and not being committed to the side that they were really on. That is what we are dealing with here.

When Elijah gave his messages, it put these people into a bind, because they knew their conscience was telling them that they had to commit themselves to God, or to Baal, and so they were disturbed. Only the individual could decide which side he was going to be on, because Elijah was making it clear: "God does not want you the way you are. Either you are going to be committed to Him, or you are not going to be committed to Him. If you are not going to be committed to Him, you are going to die."

Now Baal could not talk to them, but if Baal could, he would have probably said basically the same thing, and so it put them into a very uncomfortable situation. The lesson for us becomes very clear, because Jesus said the same thing basically to you and to me.

Matthew 12:25 Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand.

Matthew 6:24 No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other: or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other: You cannot serve God and mammon.

The lesson here for you and me is that the Sovereign Creator is not a God who allows His favor to be bought with crumbs. He is a loving Master to be obeyed and to be served on *His terms only*.

Elijah was sent by God. He was doing the responsibility of a prophet. He was prodding the people he was sent to, to their responsibilities. That is what a prophet does. He was to be an aid in getting them from their state of being merely "churched," to that of being truly religious and servants of the Most High God.

Some I know, brethren, get discouraged with the church because we are always being told, to some measure anyway, disturbing things about ourselves. But brethren, this is the place where we come to have our minds stretched and measured against Christ's standard. For one to keep on coming to services, and then leaving like a theater-goer without the opinions resolved and decisions deferred, is an erosion of character. "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin." The character is eroding away.

The sum of what Elijah said is actually dangerous, because God is judging. The purpose of Christ is to cure, not merely to comfort. Pain is going to be involved when we are dealing with a prophet, and we are dealing with a prophet here now—Elijah. Elijah then prepared the way for Elisha, who had a double portion of Elijah's spirit, and did many more miracles. In this regard, Elijah was a type of John the Baptist, and Elisha a type of Christ.

We are going to turn to some scriptures that are all in regard to John the Baptist. We have no greater testimony than that of Jesus Christ who said that nobody was greater than John the Baptist. We are looking at the greatest of the prophets. He does not seem that way just by looking at the little bit that is written about him, but Jesus Christ had a high regard for this man.

If you ever see any movies that have John the Baptist in them, they portray him like he was a wild man. There is no doubt he apparently dressed differently from other people. He stood out, but there was no doubt he was not part of the system. Again, you see, the prophet always stands apart, regardless of what family he was from. Isaiah apparently was royalty. He may have been a Jew. He was not a priest. Jeremiah and Ezekiel were priests. I believe that Elijah was either an Ephraimite or a Manassite.

John 1:19-23 And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who are you? And he confessed, and denied not: but confessed, I am not the Christ. And they asked him, What then? Are you Elijah? And he said, I am not. Are you that prophet? And he answered, No. Then said they unto him, Who are you? That we may give an answer to them that sent us. What say you of yourself? He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Isaiah.

He was asked, "Why are you baptizing?" and verse 26 is his reply:

John 1:26-27 John answered them, saying, I baptize with water: but there stands one among you whom you know not: He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose.

John 1:29-30 The next day John saw Jesus coming unto him, and said, Behold the Lamb of God, which takes away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said, After me comes a man which is preferred before me: for he was before me.

John made it very clear that though he was a prophet, he was not *the* Prophet, but rather was sent as a preparer of the way for the One who was "*the*" Prophet

Of course I know you understand that John the Baptist's ministry was "unto repentance." He came revealing to people their sins, which is what the prophets always did. What we are looking at here is not so much his ministry, as we are seeing the unique position he was in, chosen by God to be the one who would introduce the Messiah to the Hebrew world.

Matthew 11:11-14 Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there has not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you will receive it, this is Elijah, which was for to come.

That is an interesting statement all by itself. Is there another Elijah to come? It is very clear—and there is no greater authority than Jesus Christ, who said, "This is Elijah."

Now did John the Baptist restore all things? Did John turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to the fathers? This is an interesting puzzle that we have going here. It is pretty hard to gainsay what Jesus said: "This is Elijah!"

John 10:40-41 And [Jesus] went away again beyond Jordan into the place where John at first baptized; and there he [Jesus] abode. And many resorted unto him, and said, John did no miracle: but all things that John spake of this man were true.

There is no prophet greater than John the Baptist. I think we can honestly say that if there were none greater, maybe others were equal to. Maybe they were all on the same level, but even Jesus refused to say that Moses was greater than John the Baptist, and yet by worldly standards, especially from a Jew's perspective, Moses was the greatest of all. But not according to Jesus, who said nobody was greater than John the Baptist. It almost looks as though He is saying, "This is the one that everybody else ought to be measured against." At the very least, he is equal to the ones that the people in the world would think were greater. Not so.

John did the work of Elijah, revealing the true God through a ministry devoted to preaching the certainty of things contained in the Scriptures regarding Christ, and yet he did no miracles, and so it is obvious that God does not measure a man's greatness by the miracles that he does.

Matthew 17:10-12 follows on the heels of the Transfiguration.

Matthew 17:10-12 And his disciples asked him, saying, Why then say the scribes that Elijah must first come?

We have already seen what Jesus said about John the Baptist. He *was* Elijah.

Matthew 17:11-12 And Jesus answered and said unto them, Elijah truly shall first come, and restore all things. But I say unto you, That Elijah is come already. [This is the second time now Jesus said that in different circumstances.] And they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed [wished]. Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them.

When it says in verse 11 "Elijah truly shall first come and restore all things," that word "shall" there tends to make people think Jesus is speaking of a future time when an Elijah will appear. I will go only as far as to say "maybe," because there is a way of understanding verse 11 that I know is a true way. Whether it can be applied in another way, I do not know, but all Jesus said there in verse 11 is that the scribes' interpretation is correct, as far as it went. In other words, He is saying that the scribes *did* rightly quote the scripture—that before the Messiah comes, Elijah shall precede Him, and so they interpreted it that far correctly.

I do not know whether Jesus is speaking in verse 11 of *another* Elijah yet to come, but for the second time, He said, "Elijah is already come, and they killed him."

Malachi 4:4-6 gives indication of what may be an end-time Elijah that will do the same basic work as Elijah and John the Baptist. Will there be three? I do not know. It is a possibility, but we will explore another possibility perhaps at the beginning of the next sermon in regard to this, and we will see what you think. We will stop here and hopefully pick things up the next time around.