

What Is A False Prophet?

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Forerunner, "Prophecy Watch," September-October 2006

The book of Revelation foretells that at the time of the end, in the last few years of Satan's dominion over the earth, a religious personality will arise and deceive the whole world by means of miraculous signs. This individual is referred to as "another beast" (Revelation 13:11), as well as "*the* false prophet" (Revelation 16:13; 19:20; 20:10). The False Prophet is given supernatural power to do things like calling fire down from heaven (Revelation 13:13), and the signs he performs, combined with the demonic words he speaks (Revelation 16:13-14), will cause people to give their allegiance to—and even worship—the Beast (Revelation 13:14). This man will wield tremendous religious influence, and inspired by the Dragon, he will successfully convince most of the world to commit idolatry (Revelation 13:12).

The Bible does not reveal the False Prophet's name or even the number of his name, as it does for the Beast. Instead, we will have to recognize him by his fruits—by what he says and does (Matthew 7:15-20). Yet, even this is a tricky proposition. For instance, the False Prophet will be able to call down fire from heaven, and yet Elijah, a true prophet of God, did the same (I Kings 18:36-38). If we see a man calling fire down from heaven, how do we know whether he is true or false?

The end time is prophesied to be full of deceptions (Matthew 24:11), and the elect will not be totally immune to having the wool pulled over their eyes (Matthew 24:24; Mark 13:22). It will take careful evaluation to see through the façade and to recognize Satan's servants for what they *are*, rather than what they *appear* to be (II Corinthians 11:14-15).

The details given about the False Prophet are few. However, if we understand the patterns and motivations that the Bible reveals about the class of people called "false prophets," we will be better equipped to recognize the general mold that the end-time False Prophet will fit. Both Testaments describe false prophets, and Peter, John, and Jesus Christ specifically warn of false prophets that affect church members.

Defining *Prophet*

Because of the way "prophet" is commonly used, there is a misconception that its basic definition is "someone who foretells the future," but this definition is too narrow. *Prophet* is better defined as "one who speaks for another." A true prophet, then, is a person who speaks for God, delivering a message that God has ordained him to give. In Exodus 7:1, God tells Moses that Aaron, his brother, would be *his* (Moses') prophet, even as Moses was God's prophet. Because of Moses' unbelief in God's ability to speak through him, God would speak to Moses, who would tell Aaron what to say to others—Pharaoh in particular (verse 2). It is the function of speaking for another, rather than the miracles they performed or their foretelling of what would befall Egypt, which defined Moses and Aaron as prophets.

Frequently, the words a prophet spoke on God's behalf were, in fact, foretelling what would happen later. However, the prophet's essential role was to *speak for God*, regardless of whether he did any predicting of the future. A prophet expresses the will of God in words, and sometimes he uses signs to back up what he says and to demonstrate God's power behind it.

In a similar way, a false prophet also may not be in the business of foretelling the future. A false prophet is simply someone who speaks for another but falsely. False prophets either speak for the wrong god, or they claim to have heard from the true God but do not accurately represent Him or His words. At the very least, they speak out of their own human hearts, but more likely, the "god" they are speaking for is really a demon.

It is true that, if a prophet foretells something that fails to come to pass, he is a false prophet (Deuteronomy 18:20-22), but foretelling the future correctly is not the determining factor when looking at false prophets. The real issue is whether one who claims to be representing God and speaking for Him, is doing so accurately or falsely. A prophet may accurately predict an event or demonstrate supernatural power, but if he is leading people away from the true worship of the true God, he is a false prophet.

If there arises 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. You shall walk after the Lord your God and fear Him, and keep His commandments and obey His voice; you shall serve Him and hold fast to Him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has spoken in order to turn you away from the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of bondage, to entice you from the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall put away the evil from your midst. (Deuteronomy 13:1-5)

This passage begins with the assumption that the prophet *does* foretell the future accurately or perform some other, humanly impossible work. Nevertheless, if that prophet's central message is to follow after a different god or to take a spiritual path that the true God has not said to take, that person is a false prophet. God states unequivocally that misrepresenting Him incurs the death penalty, and Revelation 19:20 says that this is exactly what happens to the False Prophet: He is thrown into the Lake of Fire.

Dodging Moral Teaching

The message of the false prophet is contrasted in Deuteronomy 13:3-4 with loving the true God with all of our heart and soul (life), walking after Him, fearing Him, keeping His commandments, obeying His voice, serving Him, and holding fast to Him. These elements indicate what God wants His people to be focused on, helping to define whether a man claiming to speak for God is truly doing so or not.

Verse 4 mentions *obeying God's voice* and *keeping His commandments*. This is a regular theme with God's true prophets: They *always* have God's law undergirding their messages. When the Old Testament prophets were sent to warn or inform Israel and Judah, they always pointed out the grievous ways in which the people had transgressed God's law.

False prophets, on the other hand, will not hold the moral line that God requires. Lamentations 2:14 says that the false prophets "have not uncovered your iniquity, to bring back your captives, but have

envisioned for you false prophecies and delusions." False prophets will not connect the dots between the sinfulness of a nation and national calamity. They instead focus on something *other* than God's standard of righteousness.

This same principle appears in Isaiah 8:19-20. Both houses of Israel were guilty of seeking out mediums and wizards for spiritual guidance, and God's response is very telling:

And when they say to you, "Seek those who are mediums and wizards, who whisper and mutter," should not a people seek their God? Should they seek the dead on behalf of the living? To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.

God gives us a standard by which to measure the words of a prophet: the law and testimony—His Word. If the prophet's message contradicts what is already established as God's Word, it is evidence that he lacks spiritual understanding. If his words do not line up with God's law and testimony, he is not speaking the truth.

In summary, the hallmark of a true prophet is his upholding of the law of God, while false prophets dodge moral teaching and instead preach a message that appeals to the masses. God's truth is abhorrent to the natural mind (Romans 8:7), and thus it is quite common for God's prophets to be killed, while the false prophets enjoy widespread popularity and support.

The current trend of outcome-based churches serves as a good example. Their leaders preach a widely popular message, and thousands of people follow them. Yet, Jesus says in Luke 6:26, "Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so did their fathers to the false prophets." Popularity is not a good measurement of God's pleasure with a leader!

Jesus Christ, the most perfect Spokesman for God who has ever lived, only had about 120 true followers when His ministry ended (Acts 1:15). This was not due to failure on His part, but because His Father's message could be wholeheartedly believed only by those whose minds God had already prepared to accept it.

"Purpose-Driven" church leaders will not preach the unadulterated Word of God because they know it is divisive. It would also thwart their goals of a large following and a large income. Thus, their messages do not involve repentance, sound doctrine, or God's law, *except* where it may serve to further whatever purpose is driving them. Their messages do not remind people of their moral responsibilities to God and brother, and thus *if* they claim to speak for God or say that God sent them, we can know from biblical patterns that they are, in fact, false prophets. Their large churches, as amazing as they might seem, are not accurate indicators of God's involvement or blessing.

Fruits of False Prophets

The apostle Peter, in warning against false prophets, illuminates their characteristics. The entirety of II Peter 2 is about false prophets and false teachers. What sort of message would these men preach? What would be one's impression of God—whom they allegedly spoke for—after watching and listening to such men?

» "But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the

Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction" (II Peter 2:1). The King James Version calls their heresies *damnable*, implying that their words—their messages—are destructive to one's faith and relationship with God. "Denying the Lord" does not mean they deny that He lived or died or that He is God, but that their words and conduct are opposed to His fundamental nature. Their lives deny any close contact with Him.

» "By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber" (II Peter 2:3). False prophets use human nature's proclivity toward covetousness to make inroads to a person's heart.

» ". . . and especially those who walk according to the flesh in the lust of uncleanness and despise authority. They are presumptuous, self-willed. They are not afraid to speak evil of dignitaries, whereas angels, who are greater in power and might, do not bring a reviling accusation against them before the Lord" (II Peter 2:10-11). False prophets "walk according to the flesh"; their minds are primarily on physical things rather than the true things of God. God is not in all their thoughts (Psalm 10:4). They also despise authority—other than their own—and apparently think themselves superior even to God's angels. They are presumptuous and self-willed, acting out of the dictates of their own hearts (or the influence of a demon) rather than following God with humility and trusting Him to bring His will to pass.

» ". . . having eyes full of adultery and that cannot cease from sin, enticing unstable souls. They have a heart trained in covetous practices, and are accursed children. They have forsaken the right way and gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness . . ." (II Peter 2:14-15). The apostle says false prophets have "eyes full of adultery." While this may apply literally, it can also more generally describe *unfaithfulness*—a willingness to abandon an agreement if they feel it is in their interest to do so. They also worry little about resisting sin. Their hearts are especially *trained* in covetousness, and like Balaam, they are willing to do just about anything for personal gain.

» "While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage" (II Peter 2:19). They promise liberty—freedom, perhaps, from keeping God's law or from persecution or tribulation—but they are themselves enslaved to sin.

Not every false prophet will have each of these characteristics, but as generalities, they describe men who are much more concerned about their own situation, well-being, reputation, autonomy, and position than about accurately representing God. We will know these men to be false by the overall fruits they produce, even as they speak clever words that may even contain a degree of truth. This is seen in Jesus' warning in Matthew 7:15-20:

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. *You will know them by their fruits.* Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad

tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore *by their fruits you will know them.* (emphasis ours)

Jesus does not spell out what "fruits" to look for, although in the Olivet Prophecy, He does link the deceptions of false prophets with the lawlessness and lack of love that abounds at the end time (Matthew 24:11-13). However, the rest of the Bible elucidates God's character and nature, so we already have the tools to evaluate whether a message allegedly coming from God fits with what His Word reveals about Him. God is not double-minded; He will not contradict Himself.

"By Their Words . . ."

A false prophet, then, can be anyone who claims to be speaking for God, but whose message is contrary to God. False prophets will not convict people of sin, for they themselves do not feel convicted. While true prophets speak according to God's law and testimony, false prophets speak soft, easy things to make them more popular. They will tell people what they want to hear.

A true prophet expresses the will of God with words. Sometimes signs, wonders, and foretelling are involved to add additional weight, but the most important part is *the message*. A true prophet points people to *God* and shows people their sins. False prophets point people to almost anything else. If they *do* try to point people to a god, it will be a different god from the God of the Bible. Whoever they point to, they do it for their own benefit.

Many false prophets simply point people to themselves. Their covetousness manifests itself in a desire for power, influence, control, prestige, or importance—the antithesis of being poor in spirit, meek, pure in heart, and mourning over their ungodly weaknesses. The true prophet does not draw attention to himself but to God. If a prophet or teacher spends a great deal of time talking about himself, it is a good indication just who his god is!

John the Baptist, the last Old Testament prophet, serves as a positive contrast. He undoubtedly knew what the angel Gabriel told his father, Zacharias (Luke 1:13-17), but there is no record of John promoting this remarkable story. His focus was not on proclaiming who *he* was, but on doing the work that God had given him to do. The fruit of his life and teaching reveals that he fulfilled the role of Elijah, which Jesus confirms. A false prophet, though, with his covetousness, presumption, and self-will, is more likely to end up spending a good deal of time talking about himself.

Other false prophets, like Balaam, are essentially in it only for the money, and so they will do what is necessary to ensure that the gold rolls in. The False Prophet in Revelation points the whole world to another *man*—the Beast. A true prophet would never suggest that a man be worshipped, with the exception of John the Baptist pointing the people to God's Son, Jesus Christ. John pointed people to a Man who was also God, and thus worthy of worship.

Prophets are false when they fail to express God's will accurately, and they fail because they are not in contact with the true God. The fruits of their lives and the meaning behind their words will indicate the source of their teaching. To paraphrase Jesus Christ, by their words they will be justified, or by their words they will be condemned (Matthew 12:37). If the words of a prophet are contrary to Scripture, contrary to God's law, the prophet is false, and worthy of condemnation for leading people astray.