

Dr. Marv Wilson, Prophets, Session 4, Marks of a True Prophet

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This is Dr. Marv Wilson in his teaching on the Prophets. This is session 4, Marks of a True Prophet.

Alright, I think we'll get started.

So, let's have a word of prayer to begin the week. Gracious Lord, we are your children. We thank you for that, that through your grace you have come to us.

We don't take credit for who we are today, but we thank you that in your mercy, you sought us out, and we have responded to your message of salvation. We pray as we build values into our lives and shape our ethics and the principles for living that the prophets will indeed be an important foundation of that task. We pray that you will guide each of us this day, help us to look to you for the guidance and wisdom that we will need, and help us as a class to understand the things that are presented. Help me as a teacher; I very much need your wisdom. I ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Alright, we've been talking about some of the marks of a true prophet as opposed to a false prophet. I made the observation there was no one single test, but when you look at a number of these areas, such as an appeal to a clear call from God, the emphasis on Scripture that these were not the prophet's own words, but the Spirit of God was coming upon the prophet as he spoke, gave a message in behalf of a divine superior. The Navi was, as I said, like a postman delivering somebody else's message.

Thirdly, there's definitely a caution in Scripture about seeking to connect with ultimate reality by pagan divination. That was very much the order of the day, and all around Israel in the world of the Canaanites, and also down in Egypt, there was seeking of truth by occult means, by different forms of divination, seeking for guidance by things which in the end were very naturalistic, or were rooted really in pagan expressions of trying to connect with ultimate reality. The last point I mentioned was the prophet shunned professionalism, and I emphasize the fact that paid services of a specialist, somebody who comes in and very often has a materialistic motive in mind for service.

The prophet that was the true prophet spoke God's word, and often reluctantly. No one wanted to be a prophet. You were derided. You were often spurned, even as the New Testament Gospels tell us.

Even sometimes prophets were killed. It was not popular to be a prophet. You couldn't pay someone to be a prophet.

Rather, there was the deeper conviction that one had to be true to that sense of call that God was coming upon one, and one spoke out of obedience to that divine call and out of divine favor and commitment to the love of truth. Your concern for your fellow human beings, with whom you shared great compassion because they were off-center. They had deviated from God's high and lofty principles and ethics to which they had been called, particularly in the Torah.

False prophets then were often mercenaries, and I used as an example Balak, king of Moab, who offered fees for divination from Balaam, a Mesopotamian prophet. The other thing about professionalism is that when you hired a prophet, and there were court prophets that were around in the ancient Near East, there was the tendency for these prophets to say what the people wanted to hear, the king wanted to hear, he would be victorious in battle, rather than to speak what the people really needed to know. And again and again, particularly in the minor prophets, there is the emphasis that false prophets said everything is okay in Zion, there are no problems, a chicken in every pot, a car in every garage.

Peace, prosperity. True prophets often stroked against the fur, that is, as Heshu would put it, they made lousy house guests. They were disturbing, they were seditious, they were unsettling, because they challenged the status quo.

Again, not calling people to march to a new drumbeat, but they were calling people back to covenantal faithfulness. Not a new religion, but a more authentic following of the God of Israel. One of the problems we have in the church, when you look at it, there is a tendency on the far right to be constantly scolded in certain churches.

Nothing is right with the world. Everything is wrong with the government, with society. Everyone daily needs to be corrected because of the corruption and immorality all around us.

The other extreme of the church makes people feel, to use a prophetic word, secure in Zion. Everything is okay. Human potential just needs to be given more time to work things out.

We can do it, if we can just get along together a little bit better. I've experienced both kinds of settings. The prophets were people who were not afraid to let it fly.

If God was sending a word of reproof, correction, through their lips for their people. Therefore, I think if the church today in any way is to be prophetic in its ministry, it has to be aware of that need for prophetic balance. Again, correction, calling people to accountability, but also embracing love with hope.

There is redemption coming. There is the possibility of restoration. It's never too late.

God loves His people, so the prophetic word comforts and corrects. Another mark of a true prophet is the prophet spoke in the Lord's name. Now, there is a passage in Deuteronomy 13, verses 1-5, which speaks about worshipping other gods.

It says to find out whether you love Him with all your heart and with all your soul. That prophet or dreamer that we've just described must be put to death because he preached rebellion against the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you. So, if one comes along and if he speaks in the name of any other god, even if he predicts something which happens to come to pass, even if he performs a miracle, he is to be judged as a false prophet.

Remember, even in the New Testament it points out that Satan can perform signs and miracles. 2 Thessalonians 2:9, Revelation 13:13-15. False prophets even spoke in the Lord's name. That's why it's very easy to see how people could be deceived in Old Testament times.

And, of course, today, you learn the lingo. It's very easy for people to think, well, you're okay. You talk my language, or you talk the language of the church.

Jeremiah 29:8-9. Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in My name.

I have not sent them, declares the Lord. So, there are people who can use God's name, speak in His name, and yet actually be false prophets. Looking at the church today by way of an aside, when we pray in Jesus' name, what are we doing? What are we saying? When we pray in Jesus' name, names are more than a label or title.

When we pray in Jesus' name, we are doing so in His authority, in His power, in His person. Because a name revealed the character in the essence of one. The true prophet operated in Yahweh's power and authority by speaking in His name, Ko Amar Adonai, typical prophetic formula, thus says the Lord.

He was Yahweh's representative. And so, false prophets were greatly prevalent in Old Testament times. Even Jesus warns of false prophets in Matthew 24.

Paul in Acts 20. And 1 John 4:1 says to test whatever comes along. To see that truly it is of God.

So, there's a difference between simply learning the vocabulary, which is very easy to deceive. You can program people to use certain clichés in names. The way you get to know a character is discipleship.

Hang around with. Jesus chose the twelve, according to the opening of Mark's Gospel, to be with Him. And when you're a disciple of one and spend lots of time with them, if there's a fake or a phony or an imposter out there, sooner or later, that facade is going to come down.

The mask is going to come off because you're going to see them, what they are really like. You've all been out on dates, and it's very easy to have one date or two dates, and everything is fine, and everybody plays it close to the vest. No one wants to reveal truly what's in the heart.

But, you know, the longer you spend with someone, the more you genuinely get to know them. Who they are, what they're after, what their motives are, what their heart is like. And just like in a good human relationship today, we ought to work from the inside out.

You get to know the heart of somebody, the character of somebody, the personality of somebody, not just what they say, and it's what they do and how they live that really reveals that. In that sense, I think people in Old Testament times could hear all kinds of people out there in the marketplace, on the street corners, and even in places in the religious community where people were seeking religious instruction. People always get followers initially.

I think of one of the biggest imposters that ever came to the city of Boston. I was a teenager, and there was an evangelist who came to Boston who opened up Crusade, weeks of meetings, for several months. He rented one of the largest theaters in the downtown theater district.

I heard this guy daily on the radio. My mother-in-law told me I ought to listen to him. He could quote the Bible like a champ.

In fact, he billed himself in his ads in the Boston Globe as the walking Bible. That was the epithet. It's also really the epitaph that was to do him in.

He quoted Scripture. In fact, I was at a meeting he came to outside this theater, and he attracted a lot of teenagers, which I was at the time. He'd quote a Bible verse, and any teenager that could finish that verse with the word he wanted, he would give an autographed one-dollar bill if they walked up to the platform.

Again, Scripture rolled right off his lips. Then I remember the front page of the Boston Globe when he was finally run out of town after people were sending in

money in the evangelical community of the Boston area. He was in the *Globe* described as a man wanted on charges in Baltimore for several things.

One is a paternity suit. Secondly, being an arson parson. Do you know what an arson parson is? He bought ten homes in Baltimore and set fire to all ten in order to collect the insurance.

He didn't last very long after that. Everything was very suddenly shut down. And all the pastors and lay people in the Boston area who had been taken in, this guy sort of comes in from another planet, rents a theater, and starts teaching.

Again, why does Paul in the New Testament warn about laying hands suddenly on someone? Not a novice. Do you know what the Greek word for novice is? Literally, somebody who is newly planted. No, it takes time for the roots to go down deep.

Character is built, you see, like an icicle—one drop at a time. And while people sometimes in the modern world, as they did in the prophets' day of the ancient world, can trumpet morality—it sounds good—again, there is a disconnect between what people say and how they live.

When the prophets spoke in Yahweh's name, Yahweh's people were to be a revelation of His character. If Yahweh is just, so His people were to be just. The prophet was the one who reminded the people of that.

If Yahweh was holy, as the book of Leviticus again and again reminded His people, then His people were to be set apart. They were called to be different in a society where all the seduces of the age said, come be like us, follow us. And yet, the Jew historically, as defined by the prophets, was the Protestant of the centuries.

Called to be different. To be set apart. Not to be like all the nations of the earth.

But there was a unique relationship between Yahweh and His people. Not syncretism, not acculturation, not come be like us, but to be set apart for God's purposes in the world. And so, Israel and Israel's prophets were to reflect, as Yahweh was compassionate and merciful, so His people were to bear those attributes and characteristics as well.

So, to speak in the Lord's name, or for myself, yourself, or any other Christian to define themselves as a Christian, it's more than a label. If we don't live it out in character, it's indeed a contradiction to the label we profess or identify with. So, it's more than speaking in a name, it's to live out what that name represents.

I move on to a sixth characteristic. The prophets' credentials were often supernaturally supported, confirmed, corroborated by signs and wonders. Signs and wonders in and of themselves cannot compel belief.

But they certainly can authenticate or corroborate the messenger and His message. Have you ever thought of the great clusters of miracles you have in the Hebrew Bible? It's rather important when you think about them because they concern prophets. Miracles were not everyday occurrences in the Old Testament.

There were three periods of time where you have a clustering of miracles and each of those clusterings centers around a prophet of Israel. In Egypt, Moses. That one prophet of the Old Testament with whom God spoke.

Panim el Panim. Face to face. And so, you have these ten plagues, each of which, obviously, through these awesome signs and wonders, was to reveal the power of the living God and to show at the same time the importance of the Egyptian deities.

In many ways, the story of the Old Testament is the story of the battle of the gods. It reminds me of when I was a boy. I had a Saint Bernard, and I could brag in the neighborhood; my dog's bigger than your dog. And all the chihuahuas would run.

Saint Bernards are great dogs for this kind of weather, by the way. In Switzerland, they were avalanche workers. And the monks—it's more than legendary—they would carry brandy and a keg under their necks.

They could dig people out in the snow. They could smell them. They had big paws.

And we named ours after a famous Saint Bernard for whom there's a statue in Switzerland today in Bern, Switzerland. But the fact in Egypt, these miracles came, they showed very, very powerfully that the God of Israel was bigger, more powerful, stronger than all other claims. Osiris, the bloodstream, was seen in the Nile River that brought life, fertility, and crops to the Nile Delta area.

That's what the Nile was, the bloodstream of the god Osiris. And now drinking is no longer possible from the Nile because of the pollution of the red-like sediment or color. The frog looks up a syllabary of the beautiful pictographic signs in the Egyptian language.

There are a lot of pictures of frogs. And the frogs are destroyed. And of course, the largest manufacturing company in New England was named for the god of Egypt, Raytheon, Ray of the gods.

Ray was the sun god. And when he was obliterated for three straight days through perhaps a hamsin, a vicious sandstorm from the desert stirring up all these particles

of black dust in the air, and he was obliterated. And yet, the Hebrews had light in their dwellings.

You look at each of those miracles. In many ways, they represented a defeat of the Egyptian deities. Israel comes into the promised land.

And what do you have in the 9th century? You have a declension of worship and covenantal unfaithfulness, particularly in the Northern Kingdom at the time of Ahab and Jezebel. And so, what is God's corrective? He raises up a prophet, Eliyahu HaTishb'i, Elijah the Tishbite. And, of course, that great contest recorded in 1 Kings 18-19, up on Mount Carmel, where hundreds of prophets of Baal.

Baal, the weather god. The prevailing winds in Israel come at this time of year. The rain, and sometimes the snow off the Mediterranean.

So, in Israel, the further north and west you go, the colder and wetter it becomes. Conversely, in Israel, the further south and east you go, the hotter and drier it is. So there in the highest point on the shore of Israel, Mount Carmel.

What a place, looking down on the breadbasket of Israel. In Canaanite religious life, Baal was the one who made Jezreel. We'll talk about Jezreel later in this course.

It means God broadcasts. God sows. And it speaks of the fertility of that valley.

Later, the Greeks came along and changed the name from Jezreel to Esdraelon, which was the Grecianizing of the God-sows valley. The largest fertile valley in the north of the land. What better place for a showdown of the god of weather, fertility, germination, harvest, and life in the land.

Baal, who brings the rain and makes the crops grow. And so the prophets of Baal against the prophet of Elijah. And of course, the fire comes down and destroys the sacrifice.

He even licks up the water in the trench and consumes the stones, according to the text. And you can go to modern Israel at Muhraka and look and see a statue of Elijah there on Mount Carmel.

And today, here within a bike ride of campus, whenever a baby boy is circumcised in a temple or in a home here on the North Shore, what do you have? The Kissei Eliyahu. You have the chair of Elijah. And why is the chair of Elijah brought out whenever a child is circumcised? Circumcision was a sign of the covenant.

You must be faithful to the covenant. And so, Elijah's name, Elijah the prophet, is invoked symbolically. He being the guardian of the covenant.

When people were capitulating to Baal, it was Elijah who had the guts to stand up as a prophet and to call people back to Moses and to those moral and ethical teachings. So, in Egypt, in a pagan environment, Moses is raised up. In the northern kingdom, in the midst of a Canaanite, not Ray, but Baal kind of context, Elijah is raised up.

The one he threw his mantle on, as the opening of 2 Kings tells us, Elijah would be the greatest miracle worker in the Old Testament in terms of quantity of miracles. Many of his miracles reflect the miracles of mercy, restoring the dead to life, and other things found in the life of Jesus. The third great cluster of miracles in another pagan background where the power of the living God had to be seen in the midst of a pagan society to show that the God of Israel was a true God.

He wins. And that, of course, was in Babylon at the time of Daniel. People walk out of a fiery furnace without even the smell of smoke on their clothes.

God closes the jaws of a lion with Daniel in the lion's den. The supernatural ability of Daniel, a prophet, to interpret dreams in that pagan environment just 50 miles from the modern-day city of Baghdad that we hear so much about in modern Middle Eastern history. In each of these places in Babylon, Marduk, who was the city god of Babylon and the chief god of the Babylonians, did not come through.

It was a young Hebrew boy whom God used as a prophet. One who faithfully prayed toward Jerusalem three times a day. Just as the Jewish people in our area pray toward Jerusalem three times a day.

God was carving out then a reputation. And through His prophets, the permitting of miraculous signs and wonders were ways in which God confirmed again and accredited the messenger and the message. The prophecy, what He had to say.

And while supernatural signs did not accompany everything a prophet did, there is evidence of this in a number of these key situations. Point number seven I want to make about Marx of a true prophet. The true prophet was a person of high moral integrity.

In short, the prophet walked his talk. He had an exemplary moral life. Joseph? There's only one person in the book of Genesis that I know who is called a nabi/navi, a prophet.

And that is Abraham. Abraham. Yet to this day in Islam, Abraham, for that reason, is viewed as a prophet.

Not so much so in the Jewish community. So, I don't think Joseph is ever described as a prophet, but God in a sense worked through Joseph, particularly in His ability to

interpret dreams. And in that sense, he probably shared something similar to a number of the prophets who had dreams and visions.

And had that ability that God gave to interpret them. So, Joseph was somewhat of an oracle of God. One used of God.

But certainly, he did not stand in the classic sense of... The classic period of the prophets of Israel was the 8th century B.C. A couple before then, in the 9th century, were Elijah and Elisha. But it really got underway in the 8th century during the reign of Jeroboam II. Amos, Hosea, and Jonah in the northern kingdom.

It certainly extended into the post-exilic period because we have three post-exilic prophets: Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Those people prophesied the latter part of the 6th and into the 5th centuries.

Now, what do I mean by a person of high moral integrity? False prophets, if you followed them around carefully, you would find according to the description we have in prophetic literature itself, many of them had a low set of morals. For example, false prophets are described in Isaiah 28.7 as drunkards. They are described in Jeremiah 23.11 as profane and wicked.

Rather general distortions. The word wicked as found in Scripture often implies idolatry or evil coming from a root meaning to be separate or to be loose. And perhaps it's behind that word is the notion of being ethically loose, untied with going with the flow and making your life of morality and ethics as you go along.

Jeremiah 23:14 and 15 says they were adulterous. They lied and they supported evil. Ezekiel 13:2 describes false prophets as being liars.

In short, there are some character issues with false prophets. Probably among false prophets, we had some who were all the way on the one end from being con artists and out deliberately to deceive to other people who may have just sort of half-heartedly made pronouncements out of this rather immoral and unethical lifestyle. But according to the Bible, a prophet's moral character would attest to his authority.

In the years that I have lived as I reflect on many, many situations in the modern world, and I look back at the ancient world of the prophets, I believe that character takes precedence over outward success and blessing of one's ministry. There are a lot of people who justify the place of people in ministry based purely on the results. The people are coming.

The money is coming in. The bigger buildings are being built. This is a sign of God's blessing on me and my ministry is the idea.

And so, people start to think they are great, and the people honor them. I was in one of these churches in a southern state, speaking at a conference, and I met the pastor and his wife. Both caught up, I found out, after I got to this church, in this kind of thing.

Each of them drove into the church parking lot at two different times, about 20 minutes apart, with a brand new Bentley. Now I suggest you Google what a Bentley costs. These were shiny black new Bentleys.

And from the congregation's point of view, you know, we want to honor those who are greatly esteemed among us. Now, there are different ways of honoring people. The character of pastors and the character of prophets is very important.

As impressive as outward signs appear to be of God's material reward to human giftedness and prosperity or reward for serving God, we should not be fooled. It's not quite that simple. While I believe a workman is worthy of his hire, character, not results, is what God is interested in.

And I think in the sake of accountability within the body of believers historically is there has to be a modesty associated with this whole thing. When people get rich off of God's people, something is wrong. I suggest you go to charitynavigator.com and find out who in the 501c3 organizations of this country, many of whom are religious organizations, Christian and otherwise, who is making money off people who give.

You know, if results are the proof you're looking for, then I guess you'd have to say the mafia must be doing something right. I think the deeper issues of the moral character of a prophet would attest to his authority. You know, when you talk about spiritual and moral character, Jesus came along, and he wanted to expose what was in the heart.

Greediness. Tight-fistedness. An unforgiving spirit. A lustful heart. An arrogance in one's walk. A haughtiness.

These kinds of so-called inner sins of the spirit. Coveting. The most important of the Ten Commandments.

Why? How can you impose a penalty for coveting when coveting takes place in the inner recesses of the human heart? It reminds us the law is spiritual. Not just breaking a commandment with external results. Usually, the locus is in the heart.

It's a spiritual condition of the heart. Evil thoughts then lead to evil actions. A coveting spirit for somebody else's spouse often leads to the act of adultery.

An anger in one's spirit can lead to the taking of another's life. And so, the law is really broken, coveting indicates, in the heart. Jesus was a prophet.

And Jesus really pulled a Micah 6.8. What does the Lord desire? Jesus spoke prophetically when He said, your halak, your walking, proceeding daily with God must be characterized by zaniyut. We'll talk about the meaning of that word. It's usually translated with humility.

That's how you ought to walk before God. That's what the Lord desires, not with pompousness.

Not with arrogance. Not strutting around with a spirit of I've got it all because I'm special. It detracts from the one that one is calling people to.

Personal enrichment through ministry is wrong. And one's character must truly be revealed in that. And so, there's a tug in both directions.

You and I have it. Every human being who professes faith has it. But the prophets particularly were loners.

Loners. The reason they were loners was that nobody wanted to get too close to them lest they erupt and attack another social outrage. Another case of scandal.

So, the character of prophets was very important. Not important to the false prophet in the same sense. Another aspect of true and false prophets is when the prophet spoke of something to come, the fulfillment of predictions, again, was a factor in discerning a true prophet from a false prophet.

I read Deuteronomy 18:21, and 22. You may say to yourselves, how can we know when a message has not been spoken by the Lord? If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously.

Don't be afraid of him. In short, the historical verification of what a prophet had to say was critical in judging a true from a false prophet. One of the great examples in Scripture of this criterion is the situation of Hananiah in the 28th chapter of Jeremiah.

Hananiah, he's got a great name, grace, favor, is from Yahweh. So, he had a very believable name. But he's really a false prophet.

He was around during Jeremiah's day. And Jeremiah knew that the Lord had said there would be 70 years of Babylonian captivity. Hananiah, however, wanted to say the popular thing.

Ah, this thing is going to be over in a short period of time. So, he gets up and uses all the vocabulary that one would think he's a true prophet. 28.2 says, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says.

I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon, and within two years I will bring everything back. Now, immediately, of course, this created a conflict between what Jeremiah had been teaching and what God had already said through the prophet. Now, initially, Jeremiah doesn't jump on this guy.

He kind of says, Amen! Amen! Man, I'd like to have a two-year captivity, too. So, in verse 6, he says, Amen, may the Lord do it. May the Lord fulfill the words you have prophesied by bringing the articles of the Lord's house and all the exiles back from Babylon.

Nevertheless, Jeremiah makes a little caveat there. He says, from early times the prophets who preceded you and me have prophesied war, disaster, and plague. But the prophet who prophesied Shalom, peace, will be recognized as one truly sent by the Lord only if his prediction comes true.

So, Jeremiah backed off a little bit and is going to wait and see. Then the word of the Lord comes to Jeremiah again, in verses 12 and 13.

Go, tell Hananiah, I will put an iron yoke on the necks of all the nations to make them serve Nebuchadnezzar. Listen, Hananiah, the Lord has not sent you, yet you have persuaded this nation to trust in lies. In the seventh month of that same year, Hananiah, the prophet, died.

So, Hananiah predicted a speedy restoration within two years. Jeremiah had said 70 years. Jeremiah predicts judgment on him within a year.

You read in the next chapter the emphasis on 70 years in that letter that was sent to the exiles. One final word and I'm done. The message had to confirm previous revelation of God's truth.

That was one of the ways also to discern what God had previously said. It must not contradict or disagree with previous revelation. That's a very important principle for us today when a brother or a sister seeks to justify what they are doing under the statement, and this is the will of God for me.

And if what they are claiming to be the case, I know a seminary professor who once told me it was the will of God that he do a particular thing. Well, there's all kinds of information in Scripture that contradicted his justification for what he was doing by

saying this is the will of God. But this passage contradicts what he is saying is the will of God.

This passage contradicts it just because it's a seminary professor. It doesn't mean it's the will of God. By using that expression, it is the will of God.

You would think it's ludicrous if I told you, would you pray with me after class that I will be successful in robbing a bank? There's a disconnect there. You're not going to pray with me that I'd be successful in robbing a bank because that very notion it is the will of God that I rob a bank, you know, flies in the face of so much Scripture. Scripture can't teach one thing, and what I claim is the will of God, another.

And so, prophets had to know what God was teaching. Also, I think, in addition, in the New Testament, it's particularly stressed the witness of the Spirit. You know, God does guide through His Spirit.

And while that might be a subjective test, this gift of spiritual discernment is, nonetheless, I believe, something that God gave to the inner man. Indeed, later, as Paul in the New Testament sense of charisma, which is different from the Old Testament office of the prophet, nevertheless said the Spirit of the prophet is subject to the prophet. And if other people hear cacophony in what you're saying, then there's something to learn from the corporate understanding of truth.

And that's where I will end today. And next time we'll talk about some of the hermeneutical principles for understanding prophecy.

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