

What Does God Want to Say Through You?



What is the gift of prophecy? Who has it? What is its purpose? How can you hear what God has to say to His people? In *The Beginner's Guide to the Gift of Prophecy*, Jack Deere describes the spiritual gift at work in the

Church today. You'll find a balanced overview of the role prophecy plays in the twenty-first-century Church as well as practical guidance for discerning prophetic authenticity and for exercising the gift in your faith community. You'll learn how God speaks today, how to understand His messages, how to avoid deception and false prophets, and how to grow your gift to benefit God's people. Whether you are a beginner or an experienced prophetic minister, Dr. Deere's honest and thoughtful exploration of this biblical gift will equip you to hear what God is saying.



JACK DEERE brings practical wisdom to Christians through his teaching ministry, which draws on his experience as a professor at Dallas Theological Seminary and as the bestselling author of *Surprised by the Voice of God* and *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit*. He is the senior pastor of Wellspring Church in Fort Worth, Texas.

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The Beginner's Guide to

The Gift of Prophecy



JACK DEERE



— The — Beginner's Guide to

The Gift of Prophecy

Understand the Gift of Prophecy
Discover and Activate the Gift in Your Life
Learn to Discern God's Voice and
Use Your Gift Wisely



JACK DEERE

Understanding God's Meaning

Blood pressure.

From out of nowhere those words entered my mind. The woman at whom I was looking appeared perfectly healthy. She was seated in the third row on my left. I was standing on the stage, looking at the crowd, praying for revelation. And then it came, though nothing suggested the woman had blood pressure problems and I had not been talking or thinking about illnesses.

I had grown accustomed to experiences like this, experiences that some call "words of knowledge." However, I wasn't accustomed to what was about to follow, nor was I prepared for the lesson the Lord was going to give, a lesson about how we should listen when He speaks, and more importantly, a lesson about my heart.

I looked at the woman for a moment longer. This was going to be impressive. I was sure.

"Do you have high blood pressure?" I asked the lady.

"No," she replied. I couldn't believe it. I was sure the Lord had indicated that she did. Maybe I had been a little hasty in calling *her* out. Maybe it was someone in her family.

"Does anyone in your family have high blood pressure?"

"No." Strike two. Maybe the revelation wasn't for this lady, but for someone seated near her, and I just hadn't given the Lord time to indicate who it really was.

"Does anyone seated around this lady have high blood pressure?" I asked that part of the audience.

Strike three. I suppose I could have continued, "Well, does anybody know anybody anywhere in the world that might possibly have high blood pressure, or had it once upon a time?" That might have gotten me kicked off the team. If I just accepted strike three, I might get to bat again. The church where I was speaking, Trinity Fellowship of Amarillo, Texas, was one of my favorite churches. I wanted to stay on the team there. So, embarrassed and confused, I admitted my mistake and continued the meeting.

After the meeting, the woman who did not have high blood pressure came up to me and said, "You know, my husband has low blood pressure. It's so bad that sometimes he passes out. Do you think that might have been what you were seeing?" I had made a beginner's error in prophetic ministry.

The mercy of the Lord is so great that He overcame my error, so that nothing was lost that didn't need to be lost. Actually, more was gained in my mistake than would have been gained in my success. Before I explain the error, let me explain the mercy. First, the Lord still allowed us to identify who had the blood pressure problem so that we could pray for him. Second, the Lord showed me why I made the error so that I could learn from it. Third, since I am writing about it now, you and others may profit from my failure. Fourth, there was something I needed to lose. The embarrassment I suffered was a small price to pay for that loss, which I will share with you later.

The wonderful thing I took away from this little failure was that when we are willing to risk looking foolish

for the Lord, His mercy redeems even our mistakes and makes us better.

What had led to the mistake? Actually, there were two mistakes. Nobody saw the first one, not even me, because it took place in a hidden part of my heart. The first mistake produced the one the audience saw, a simple flaw in my methods, which was much easier to correct than the mistake I'd made in my heart.

Revelation, Interpretation and Application

The mistake in my method was this: I had failed to distinguish between revelation (what is said), interpretation (what it means) and application (what we do about it). These three factors are involved every time God speaks to us.

The revelation is the message of God. The message may come through the Bible, a dream, an impression, or in other ways. If the revelation is from God, then it must be true because God cannot lie (see Heb. 6:18). However, we can have a true revelation and give it a wrong interpretation. Furthermore, we can have a true revelation, a correct interpretation and a wrong application. We have to be right at all three stages if the message from the Lord is going to benefit someone.

I had heard the words "blood pressure" in my mind when I looked at the woman. The revelation was true, but my interpretation was false. I immediately jumped to the conclusion that the revelation must mean high blood pressure. After all, high blood pressure is much more common than low blood pressure. The other assumption

I made was that the revelation referred to the woman that I was looking at when the word came into my mind. Calling her out publicly (the application), ensured my embarrassment.

Here is what I should have done: I should have asked the Lord what the word about blood pressure meant and how it applied to this lady. Suppose I had done that, but the Lord had not answered me. Then I could have asked the lady to help me with the interpretation. I could have said, "Just a moment ago, I was looking at you and the words 'blood pressure' came to my mind. Do those words mean anything to you?" Had I done this, she would have said, "Oh, my! They certainly do mean something. My husband has low blood pressure, and he even passes out from it!"

Even seasoned prophetic people can misapply revelation. The prophet Agabus heard the Holy Spirit say that when Paul went to Jerusalem he would be imprisoned. Paul's companions, including Luke and maybe even Agabus, urged him not to go. But Paul went anyway (see Acts 21:10-14). The revelation was true. But Paul and his companions came up with two contradictory applications of the revelation. One of them had to be wrong.

A helpful practice is to distinguish between the revelation, interpretation and application.

Write It Down

Another helpful practice is to follow Daniel's example. He wrote down his visions and dreams immediately after having them (see Dan. 7:1). We cannot interpret what we cannot remember. We can have the most vivid dream and

think we will never forget it, but if we do not write it down within 5 to 10 minutes after waking, most likely we will forget the dream within the hour. Visions and impressions can also be lost quickly, as well as insights gained from meditating on Scripture. I have developed the habit of writing down everything. This has helped me to accommodate the Lord's tendency to speak to me at "inconvenient" times. I think the Lord often speaks to us at inconvenient times to test our desire to hear Him.

For much of my Christian life, I had no appreciation of the Lord's spontaneity. I assumed He would speak to me only through the Bible, and that it would be *when* I was studying the Bible. It seemed reasonable to me that God would accommodate Himself to my preferred mode of divine communication and to my schedule. After all, I was quite busy serving Him. I made notes during my Bible study, and God did speak to me. I learned things about God, the devil and demons, myself and others. But I also missed a great deal of what God was saying to me during those days because I restricted my listening to only one form of the Lord's communication and mainly to one time of the day.

Although God was speaking to me at various times and in various ways, I ignored those ways because I thought they were unreliable. I thought they would distract me from the Bible, even lessen my love for it. I expected God to speak to me only when I was sitting behind a comfortable desk with an open Bible, a few other books, a notepad and a cup of hot coffee at hand. It was not very personal and not very much like the way He spoke to people in the Bible, but it was convenient.

And it suited my academic personality.

When I finally admitted that the way God spoke to people in the Bible was also the way He was speaking to people today, I began to hear His voice more frequently and more personally. I now have a more intimate relationship with Him. Because of the intimacy in our relationship, I speak to Him often during the day, and He to me. What I've discovered is that He is not nearly so predictable as I used to imagine. And that discovery has made life with Him much more adventurous.

I keep paper, pen and sometimes a little recorder with me wherever I go, and also by my bed. If I wake up at 3:00 A.M. at the end of a vivid dream, I write it down. If an insight comes to me while I'm driving, I can use the recorder to capture it. God often speaks to us during mundane chores. When He does, we need to stop and write it down. This habit will help us meditate on what He says to us. Sometimes He may show us something that will not come to pass for months or even years.

Take Mary, for example. When the shepherds came to Mary and told her all that the angels had said about her baby son, she "treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). When her 12-year-old son wandered off from the caravan to spend an extra three days at the Temple, she did not understand His enigmatic excuse, but she "treasured all these things in her heart" (Luke 2:51). Years later, when she needed the treasure to get her through her greatest pain, it was safely hidden in her heart for just that day.

If we do not write down the revelation, we may lose the blessing that was meant for us and others. It may

even cost us money, as it once did with me.

I was in the middle of some mindless task when out of nowhere an impression came into my mind regarding a stock I owned. The impression was that the stock was going to triple in value, and when it did, I should sell it. I was sure this was from God. I did not write it down, but I did tell my wife. The stock began to rise until it tripled. I did not sell. I had forgotten the impression. And besides, no one thinks their rising stock will ever stop rising. I did not sell and the stock eventually fell below the price it was at the time I had the impression. My wife reminded me of the impression after the stock fell. She also reminded me to practice what I preach. Write it down.

The Role of the Heart

Writing down your revelations as well as distinguishing between revelation, interpretation and application are helpful practices. Still, they don't get to the heart of interpretation. For example, in the story at the beginning of this chapter, you may have wondered why God did not just say "low blood pressure" in the first place. If He could suggest "blood pressure" to my mind, how difficult would it have been to add the word "low"? Even if I had not given the revelation an erroneous interpretation, that question would still need an answer. In that answer lies the key to interpreting all revelation.

I think God omitted the word "low" because He was teaching me humility. First, He was teaching me to ask for an interpretation so that I might learn the habit of humble dependence on Him for everything. Second, He let me

suffer a little healthy embarrassment. Let me explain why the embarrassment was healthy.

When the words "blood pressure" came to my mind, I experienced a surge of joy. In retrospect, I know that part of that joy was the delight I always feel in the presence of concrete expressions of the Lord's omniscience. But another part of the joy came from anticipating how impressed the audience was about to be with my revelatory knowledge. I had fallen into a common trap.

"Knowledge puffs up" (1 Cor. 8:1). No one is immune from the pride of knowledge, not the scholar with his mastery of academic minutiae or the prophet who sees the secrets of others' hearts. Knowledge in any form makes it difficult for us to escape being impressed with ourselves and to escape the joy of impressing others. This does not impress the One who knows everything. He rather hopes that we use the knowledge He gives us in a different way: to impress people with His Son. To help us die to the pleasure of self-exaltation, He occasionally replaces that pleasure with embarrassment.

In my case, the embarrassment caused me to turn to the Lord for an explanation of my mistake. Eventually I recognized it for what it was: a gentle reminder not to be impressed with myself when the Holy Spirit shows me the secrets of His children. The embarrassment that the Lord engineered was not a sign of His irritation, but rather of His love and His commitment to instill humility in me.

Later, we shall return to the refining quality of embarrassment, but for now let me note that you won't find it discussed in literature dealing with the science of biblical interpretation. There is a telling reason for this omission.

Most of the books on interpreting Scripture that I have read lead you to believe that the key to understanding the Bible lies in your mind. The best interpreters know the original languages and historical backgrounds of the Bible. They understand literary structure, systematic theology and many other things. In short, these scholars are the intellectual elite. Of course, no one admits to holding this position, but they demonstrate it by what they do not say as much as by their emphasis on the mind as the key to understanding divine communication.

Please don't misunderstand: I am not denigrating scholarship. Scholarship can be a great blessing. Every time I use a concordance, a great biblical commentary or a carefully thought-out theological monograph, I am benefiting from someone's scholarship. What I am objecting to is the intellectual pride that is too frequently found in biblical scholarship, the pride that makes the mind the key element in our effort to draw close to God. All too often, those of us who have spent considerable time in academic realms forget the purpose of all theological study: to see God in His glory, to draw close to Him and to enjoy Him forever. The mind certainly has a role to play in this pursuit, but it does not play the chief role.

According to the Bible, as far as human responsibility is concerned, the key to interpreting all forms of divine revelation is found in the heart, not in the mind. The religious leaders of Jesus' day studied the Bible more than anyone, but because of the condition of their hearts, they never heard God's voice at any time (see John 5:37). When God spoke to Jesus in an audible voice, some of the people standing by Him only heard thunder, even though the

voice had come for their benefit (see John 12:27-30). Like them, if our hearts are not right, we won't be able to recognize God even when He speaks to us in an audible voice.

The Pharisees may have been intelligent, but they were also arrogant. Their pride made it impossible for them to hear God's voice through the Bible, through the miracles of Jesus or in any of the other ways God was speaking. On the other hand, Jesus was humble in heart (see Matt. 11:29) and never failed to hear God's voice. Humility, not intelligence, has always been the heart quality that moves God to speak to us and enables us to hear Him clearly. It is the humble, not the smart, that God guides and teaches (see Ps. 25:9).

When it comes to understanding God's voice, three expressions of humility stand out. The humble want (1) to obey, (2) to be friends with God, and (3) to pray.

Obedience

The religious leaders did not believe that Jesus was speaking the words of God, so He gave them a way to discern the origin of His message. He said, "If any man is willing to do His will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it is of God, or whether I speak from Myself" (John 7:17, NASB).

Humble people want to obey God, even when obedience is painful. Our willingness to do whatever He tells us encourages Him to speak to us and enables us to recognize and understand His voice. Why should He speak to us if He knows we have no intention of obeying Him?

Friendship with God

Humble hearts are never satisfied with obedience alone. They want an intimate friendship with God. And they

want that friendship more than they want a ministry. The most impenetrable mystery is that this is also what God longs for.

The Lord longs for friends with whom He can share His secrets. Abraham got so close to God that God did not want to do anything without revealing it to him first (see Gen. 18:17). This closeness is the goal of prophetic ministry, not the delivering of prophetic words. Powerful prophetic words are the by-product of being close friends with the most powerful Word of all.

Which do you think Jesus would rather have: servants or friends? Which would you rather have? Who brings you the most joy: the person who waits on you or the one with whom you share your heart? Jesus said to the disciples, "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15). God wants friends with whom He can be intimate. What do we want?

Good friendships do not just happen. They are cultivated over a period of time, and they are often painful. They take time because trust grows slowly. They are painful because friends become vulnerable to one another, and no one can hurt us like a close friend. The pain of intimacy scares some of us into settling for just being servants, but humble people endure the pain and take the time that all great friendships require.

Ministry sidetracks me all the time. Someone has said that the greatest hindrance to loving God is serving God. I believe it. I have to ask myself repeatedly: *What is it I really want, a great following or a great friendship?* When I am

really sidetracked, I forget to ask myself that question. But then God asks me. He seems determined to make a good friend out of me in spite of my willingness to settle for less. And I am sure He feels the same way about you.

Prayer

Humble people pray. Praying is one of the most practical things we can do, both to get revelation and to understand it. God told Jeremiah, "Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know" (Jer. 33:3). How much revelation do we forfeit simply because we do not ask God to tell us "unsearchable things"? How much revelation do we fail to understand because we do not ask God to reveal its meaning?

When Daniel was meditating on Jeremiah's prophecy that Israel's captivity would last for 70 years, he prayed. An angel was sent to give Daniel "insight and understanding" (Dan. 9:22). Prayer is the instrument that allows us to search the depths of Scripture, as well as the meaning of visions and dreams.

Prophets have special gifts to interpret revelation that occurs outside the Bible. Some of today's prophets have gifts similar to Joseph and Daniel, who were extraordinarily proficient at interpreting not only their own dreams but also the dreams of others. Some prophets are so gifted at interpretation that it seems effortless, but if we examine the lives of those in the Bible who are skilled interpreters of revelation, we find that they were always devoted to prayer.

Consider Daniel again. In the third year of King Cyrus, Daniel had a vision so perplexing and horrifying that he

mourned, fasted and prayed over the vision for three weeks. At the end of the three weeks, an angel came to Daniel and said, "Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them . . . Now I have come to explain to you what will happen to your people in the future" (Dan. 10:12-14).

This experience makes Daniel a model for all of us who want to understand the language of the Holy Spirit. All of the elements that unlock the meaning of revelation—humility expressed in prayer, friendship with God and willingness to obey God—can be found in this chapter of Daniel. The prophet was given a vision he could not understand. Instead of giving up, he "set [his] mind to gain understanding." Then he prayed and fasted until the interpretation came. When we pray and fast, we are confessing our weakness and expressing our dependence on God. This is why the angel said that Daniel had humbled himself before God. He had a friendship with God, for he was "highly esteemed" by God (10:19). And he was willing to do whatever was required to obey and to understand the vision.

Following Daniel's example is the best way I know to gain understanding of divine mysteries. It does not guarantee, though, that the Lord will automatically show us the meaning of Scripture or other forms of revelation. The Lord's friendships are not bound by mechanical rules. We know so little of God and His ways. Some things He will leave shrouded in mystery, regardless of our best efforts to understand them. Don't be discouraged by this. A life

without mystery is a dull life. And even though mysteries may make us anxious at times, God promises to quell our anxieties with His peace (see Phil. 4:6-7). Remember this the next time the Lord speaks to you with a disturbing symbol.

The Purpose of Symbolic Language

"Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you," said Jesus (John 6:53). Why would He use such outrageous symbolism? The crowd of disciples following Him did not appreciate it. It caused them to grumble, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" (John 6:60). And it caused many of them to desert Him.

But why were they following Him in the first place? Jesus said they were following Him for food (see John 6:26). And that is the great temptation of religious people: using God rather than loving Him, following Him for what He can do for us rather than for who He is. The pagans went after idols for the same reason. Jesus was happy to provide food for His followers, but He wanted them to know He was more than a caterer.

Jesus transformed their desire for physical food into one of His most shocking metaphors. He was telling the crowd that they were seeking Him for too little. He was not only the sustenance of physical life, but also the source of eternal life. The metaphor was meant to shock them into looking beneath the surface of the miracle of the loaves and fishes.

Jesus warned them that His words were not literal (see John 6:63). If only they had stayed around long enough, they would have learned that Jesus used hard sayings to

frustrate the impure motives of everyone who tried to be close to Him. But they couldn't endure the frustration. They left the Bread of Heaven to look for a food that was more down to earth.

When Jesus tried to tell His followers that He was the real food, "the bread that came down from heaven," the Jewish leaders on the fringe of the crowd who overheard were offended. The Jewish leadership had fallen into the other great temptation of religious people: to serve God through merely human intellect, discipline and traditions. This offended the Lord so much that *He* offended their understanding. He used a hard saying to conceal the key to life from the Jewish leaders.

The Lord hides His wisdom in the Holy Spirit so that the intellectually and religiously proud cannot find it with their natural talents. The ones who are committed to living by the power of their own intellects can't live with that offense to their minds.

The 12 disciples were just as clueless, but they were not offended. They believed Jesus had a purpose in using the shocking language, and they stayed around to learn what He really meant.

To summarize: Symbolic language conceals truth from the proud, reveals the most profound truth to the humble and jars us awake when we are tempted to use God rather than love Him. It also does something else: It impacts our emotions. This is especially true of dreams and visions, which are often symbolic rather than literal. Prosaic warnings may be easily ignored, but the symbols of dreams and visions may frighten us out of our lethargy (see Job 33:15-18). I know we preachers are always telling

everyone not to live by their feelings, but our exhortations will never change the fact that our feelings influence us greatly. Because they do, God uses pictures and symbols to intensify our feelings.

Not all of God's warnings terrify us. Sometimes they show us our future, a bright future that we are in danger of losing. Such was the case with a young man in our church who was flirting with sexual immorality. Actually, it was flirting with him in the form of several young, wild women who were pursuing him. I was not the only leader to warn him. But the warnings found no home in his heart. Now it was God's turn to provide a more direct approach. A dream.

The dream showed the young man married and in the delivery room with his beautiful wife. A beautiful son was born and placed in his arms. His family was gathered around him. He was overwhelmed with love and exploding with joy. When he woke up, the scene lingered and so did the joy, and he understood.

God had shown him the future, his future. A marriage made in heaven was waiting for him. Now the importance of his present actions weighed heavily on him. He understood the women pursuing him could steal what he had seen, and he told them goodbye.

This dream, while prophetic, was not really symbolic, and therefore it was easy to interpret. But what about the difficult symbols of dreams and visions? How do we interpret them?

Interpreting Symbols

When Jesus mystified everyone with the invitation to drink His blood and eat His flesh, the 12 disciples reacted dif-

ferently from the crowd. Instead of deserting the Lord, they stayed close to Him, talked to Him and waited for Him to reveal His meaning. Today, we do these same things through prayer. For in prayer we draw close to Jesus, talk with Him and wait on Him.

I'm now going to offer some practical suggestions for interpreting symbols, but none of the following advice comes close to the importance of prayer. Conversing with the One who gave us the symbols is the best way to discover their meaning.

Although it is possible to discern some fairly consistent symbolic meanings in Scripture as well as in contemporary experience, there is no manual of symbols that will give us ready-made interpretations of the nonliteral elements in our dreams and visions. This is because symbols can have different meanings in different contexts. In one setting, a baby may represent a new ministry filled with potential. In another, the baby may represent weakness and immaturity. We must pay close attention to the context.

Even though we don't have a manual to give us automatic understanding, it is still valuable to search Scripture and contemporary experience, both of which may suggest possible meanings for the symbolic use of persons, places, things or events.

Many things have both literal and symbolic meanings in the Bible. For example, the color purple often stands for royalty, while blue represents heaven or revelation. Many plants and animals have symbolic functions. Foxes can symbolize cunning or small destructive influences, as in the little problems that destroy a marriage over time if they are ignored (see Song of Songs 2:14). Vipers may

represent either religious poison or gossip. Body parts have symbolic functions. For instance, the right hand stands for power. To cite just a few more examples, wine can represent joy. Wind may represent the Holy Spirit (see John 3:8) or it may symbolize judgment (see 1 Kings 19:11). Gold, silver or jewels represent something valuable and rare.

Almost anything can have a nonliteral meaning. How do we discover these possibilities? Start by using a concordance, preferably an electronic one. Computer software is so much faster than using a book. I can type in the word that I'm looking for, and immediately all its occurrences come onto the screen. I can scroll up and down, reading the context in which any word lies. The concordance usually reveals several possible symbolic meanings, but frequently while I am searching, one meaning seems to jump off the screen, fitting perfectly into the context of my dream or vision.

Sometimes symbols are taken from our contemporary experience rather than from the Bible. When this happens, look for the commonplace associations of the symbol; that is, the thing or things that you usually think of in connection with the symbol. For example, in your dream you are in an airplane that crashes because of pilot error. You don't need a scientific knowledge of aircraft to understand this dream. What do you commonly associate with airplanes? Transportation, speed and high altitude are the first things that come to my mind. The airplane could represent a ministry that is taking you to spiritual heights very fast, but because of the leaders' inexperience, the ministry is headed for a major disaster. The dream could be a warning to pray for the leaders of the ministry.

Our thoughts and feelings about the symbol are important too, for God chooses particular symbols because of their potential to communicate with us. If we lived in a remote place where no one had any knowledge of airplanes, it is not likely that He would use them as symbols to convey His truth.

Another practical tip for understanding dreams or visions is to pay attention to any detail that stands out. That detail is usually a major clue to the meaning of the revelation. But don't try to get a meaning out of every detail of a symbol. The context of the dream or vision will determine which details are relevant.

Over the years, as you treasure the dreams and visions given to you by the Lord, you may find that you have acquired your own personalized dream vocabulary.

None of the above guidance for interpreting symbols should be seen as minimizing or contradicting the need for prayer. When we want to understand a divine communication, whether a scriptural text or a dream, we should pray, consult others who have wisdom in this area and make use of any scholarly resource at our disposal. But we want to be sure that our ultimate confidence is in the Lord's goodness to make His revelations clear, rather than in our intellectual capacities to figure them out.

I have spent so much time on symbolic meanings because the most common mistake made in interpreting dreams and visions is to take something literally that was intended to be taken symbolically. For example, heart attacks in dreams or visions often point to spiritual attacks on the heart, rather than warnings about physical cardiac arrest. Wheelchairs frequently denote spiritual paralysis.

A leader you know appears on a famous national TV program in your dream; this may mean that the ministry he or she represents is going to be given national exposure, not that the leader is actually going to appear on TV. There are no rigid rules to distinguish the literal from the symbolic or to automatically decipher symbols. Discernment is acquired in prayer over time and with practice.

Another bit of advice: Most of the time, negative events in dreams and visions are warnings, not decreed events (see Job 33:13-18). The dream may warn us what will happen if we do not repent of a certain attitude or behavior. Or we may not be doing anything wrong at all. Perhaps the devil has planned a special attack against us, and the negative dream is an encouragement to pray so that the calamity won't come to pass. This is the way I treat all negative dreams unless the Lord shows me otherwise.

Tormenting Dreams

She was being shot repeatedly with a machine gun. She felt every bullet rip into her flesh, but she could not fall down. The force of the shots was holding her body up. And she could not die, so the bullets just kept tearing into her.

This was one of the dreams Leesa woke up to shortly after she began to have prophetic dreams. All prophetic people I know are subject to tormenting dreams, which only *seem* to be revelatory. They tell a very real and coherent story, but it's a bad story, usually the thing the prophetic person fears most. If a prophetess is feeling she is losing her beauty, she may have a dream about her husband being attracted to another woman. The dream will

be so real that she will experience the despair of abandonment. She may even wake up angry at her husband. Sometimes the devil is the source of these dreams. He is a master deceiver and will imitate the ways that God speaks (see chapter 8 for more on this).

In other instances, we ourselves are the source of the tormenting dream. What we do just before we go to bed can influence our dreams. If we fall asleep worrying, chances are we will have a negative dream about our worries. Movies we watch before we fall asleep, especially horror movies, may have a negative effect in our dreams. Excessive amounts of alcohol or certain kinds of foods can also interfere with our dreams. In addition, some kinds of drugs, legal as well as illegal, trouble our dreams.

How can we tell the difference between a true warning dream and a tormenting dream? First, we must see if there is a connection between the dream and what we were doing just before we fell asleep. Second, does the dream reflect something we habitually fear or worry about? Fear and worry are entry points for demonic deception. Third, does the dream take away our hope, making us feel that neither prayer nor repentance will help? Hopelessness and condemnation are signs of the accuser's revelation. If we consistently ask the Lord to show us the difference between His dreams and those of our flesh or from the enemy, we will learn to discern the source.

When Leesa first began to have prophetic dreams, almost every other night she had a tormenting one. We put up with this for six weeks before we came to our senses. We prayed every night before we went to bed, asking God to keep the devil from invading her dreams. The invasion

stopped. Occasionally she is visited by a tormenting dream, but that is part of the price of being prophetic.

Prophets do not live in a tidy world. They move in realms where angels and demons cross paths, where the counterfeit and the real intermingle. Confusion and ambiguity are their frequent companions. A fleeting vision or a barely remembered dream may hold the key for someone's rescue. Of all the gifts, none seem to rest on such flimsy experiences as prophecy. No ministry is as difficult to learn. It is so much more art than science. It may also be the most valuable of all the gifts. It is the only spiritual gift that the apostle Paul singled out and urged the whole Church to pursue (see 1 Cor. 14:1,39).

Be patient with yourself as you learn to understand the prophetic language of the Holy Spirit. Humble persistence is more important than intelligence when trying to discover what only God can reveal. Understanding is the reward for those "who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil" (Heb. 5:14, *NASB*).

Chapter Six

Avoiding Prophetic Craziness

Not all crazy people are in asylums. Some are running around loose, imitating prophets. Often they get away with it because some of the real prophets seem just borderline sane.

I'm not just talking about today's genuine prophets. I also mean the prophets of the Bible. If Jeremiah were ministering today, any number of churchgoing people would recommend Prozac and long-term counseling. The biblical prophets frequently not only appeared unhappy and angry, but they also did strange things. Jeremiah bought an expensive linen belt, buried it and dug it up later, claiming the ruined belt was a message to the nation. Hosea married a prostitute—not one of those sentimental prostitutes with a heart of gold like in the movies, but a brazen prostitute who had other men's babies. The most literate prophet of the Bible, Isaiah, went around naked for three years. What kind of therapy would we encourage him to enter if he were in our congregation?

The bizarre behavior of the biblical prophets does not bother us today because they are not in our churches. They are safely tucked away in the pages of the Bible. We are also helped greatly by the fact that the Bible is the most unread book in our churches. This means that many of us are not aware of the strange things in the Bible.

But it is not just our biblical ignorance and their contemporary absence that keeps us comfortable with the eccentric acts of the prophets. There is also a theological reason why we are not troubled by their incongruous conduct. What ultimately legitimizes the prophets of the Bible is that God stands behind their weird ways.

God is the one who told Jeremiah, Hosea, Isaiah and company to do those peculiar things. The fact that God told Isaiah to go naked or told Abraham to kill his son makes us comfortable with Isaiah and Abraham. But it should not make us comfortable with God. The only way to derive comfort here is to assume that God does not speak anymore except in the pages of the Bible, or that He has given up His strange ways. But you probably would not be reading this book if you believed that. It is much more likely that you believe God still speaks today and that He might even ask you to do something strange. This may very well be true, but if you are not humble, wise and careful, these beliefs may very well get you into trouble that God did not intend for you.

Prophetic Megalomania

When I first began pursuing prophetic ministry, I met a young man who thought he was a prophet. I will call him Robert. He was walking along the sidewalk after a rain and noticed a dead worm in his path. He thought God was speaking to him about the worm. So he picked it up, thinking that if he prayed for it God would bring it back to life. The worm did not respond. Undaunted by his failure to revive the worm, he had a new thought: God was

leading him to put the worm into an envelope and give it to one of the leaders of a prominent Christian movement. Robert had no idea why God wanted him to do this. He also had no authority or place within the movement, but he felt like a man on a mission from God.

When he walked into the offices of the ministry to deliver the deceased worm, he was not given the warmest of receptions. He interpreted this to mean that the underlings serving the leader were jealous of him and afraid that he might become closer to the leader than they were. If the underlings were afraid, their fear proved groundless when the leader opened the envelope. The leader did the right thing by the late little annelid and by the "prophet": He gave the worm an immediate burial in the wastepaper basket. Then he thanked Robert and told him goodbye.

Robert was sure that his failure to worm his way into the movement was due to the corrupt hearts of the underlings who had allowed an evil spirit access to the ministry offices. He could not accept that his strange act had anything to do with his rejection. (After all, the unsolicited gift of an expired earthworm is not even close to the exhibitionism of a naked prophet.)

I followed the young man's career for a while longer, and the same patterns were repeated. Instead of learning from the failures of his bizarre behavior, Robert developed a theology to justify it. God "told" him somewhere along his journey that his ministry would be rejected. Armed with the weird incidents of the Bible and a divine promise of rejection, he would always be able to justify his antisocial ways and blame someone else for his failures in ministry. I know of at least one occasion when he

turned a whole church off to the gifts of the Spirit, helping them to despise the gift of prophecy in particular.

This is tragic, because Robert is not a prophet. He is a stumbling block masquerading as a prophet. Several leaders tried to help him see this, but they were not able to reach him.

In the book of Proverbs, the fool is depicted as a megalomaniac beyond correction (see Prov. 27:22). If we are foolish enough, we will always be able to find something in the Bible to justify wrong or weird behavior or corruption in our hearts.

Thankfully, I have met only one or two people in the prophetic ministry as insular as Robert. However, his example is a warning: Before we use the prophets of the Bible to justify some unorthodox action on our part, we should remember that they had the highest levels of discernment and character. When God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac or Hosea to marry Gomer, the issue was not whether or not they were discerning accurately the voice of God. They heard His voice clearly. The issue was obedience. We should also expect God's voice to be that clear before doing something strange, especially when we could hurt someone.

Still, sometimes the Lord does do things that appear unorthodox or strange. But there is a right way and a wrong way to respond to these acts.

Glorifying the Strange

The Lord did transport prophets in the Spirit to other places to show them things, and sometimes the Spirit

picked up people physically and dropped them off at other locations (see 1 Kings 18:12; Acts 8:39). Today this may sound like New Age astral travel, but the Scriptures teach us that the Lord indeed does strange things. For example, He caused a donkey to speak (see Num. 22:21-30), and He must have done something strange to the apostle Paul's handkerchiefs, because when people waved them over the ill or demon-possessed, demons came out and illnesses were cured (see Acts 19:11-12). These things actually happened, and God did them all.

Why? Sometimes He did it to offend the minds of the religious know-it-alls, sometimes to frustrate the flesh of the proud, and perhaps for a hundred other reasons God has never cared to share with us. The point is that from the beginning to the end of the Bible, God did strange things. It would be foolish to imagine that once the Bible was completed, God changed His ways to accommodate our sense of good taste. He is still doing strange things.

Which raises a question: How should we respond when we encounter one of God's strange acts today? We should glorify Him for the experience. Unfortunately, some in the Church glorify the experience. I was in a meeting where God had been revealing His presence with some unusual physical manifestations. Five people were giving testimonies at the beginning of the meeting. The first four told about life-changing encounters with God at this series of meetings and included humorous details of physical phenomena they had experienced. The fifth, a young lady, told how her life had been changed, but added that she had not experienced any physical manifestations.

The interviewer said to a crowd of several thousand, "See, that shows you don't have to shake or fall down to experience the power of God." Then as a group prayed on the stage for the young lady, he added, "But God's gonna get you yet." The crowd erupted into laughter and applause, hoping she would fall or shake. She didn't.

The interviewer did not mean to do it, but his last statement told the crowd that if you have not shaken, you have not really met God's power. He was glorifying the manifestations of God's presence rather than God. When we do this, we are like children on Christmas morning who unwrap our presents but play instead with the shiny wrapping paper. When God gives physical manifestations, they are just the wrapping paper around His presence. That's the real gift. It is the presence that is crucial, not how the presence is manifested.

The interviewer did not know he was glorifying the experience rather than God. Neither do we. Putting our attention on manifestations and methods always leads us into deception because our eyes have left the One who is Truth. That is why humility is so important. Humble people are less easily deceived, and even when they are deceived, they are more quickly corrected.

Reproducing the Strange

Trying to reproduce the strange can be just as damaging as glorifying the strange. Often the strange happening is a singular, sovereign event. Consider the handkerchiefs taken from Paul's body. The Bible only tells about one occurrence of this phenomenon. It happened in the city of magic,

Ephesus, where people used all sorts of charms to manipulate spirits and the forces of nature. Christians, some good and some bad, try to reproduce this today by blessing prayer cloths and giving (or selling) them to the sick.

I'm not saying that God has not healed the sick today using this method (or even stranger ones). But those passing out the prayer cloths are not getting the same results as Paul did. Some are copying the wrong thing. They should set their hearts on copying the character of the apostle Paul, not his handkerchiefs. When we get to the point where we do all things for the sake of the gospel (see 1 Cor. 9:23) and suffer for Christ as Paul did (see 2 Cor. 11:16-32), then who knows: Maybe God will endue our clothing with a little power. But it is a lot easier to pass out prayer cloths than to get the character of Paul.

One more clue from the apostle: Paul talked a lot more about the Lord than he did about his strange experiences with the Lord. He never even mentioned the handkerchief episode; his friend Luke told that story. And Luke's purpose in telling it was not to introduce a new healing method but to demonstrate the superior power of the Lord Jesus Christ over all the Ephesian evil spirits and their magic.

In spite of the preceding cautions, at times God still does strange things. Even worse, He may do something both strange and *new*. Worse still, He may ask *us* to do something strange and new. What do we do then?

False Guilt

During a question-and-answer time in a seminar, a lady presented me with the following problem: She had been

praying for a blind lady to receive her sight. Nothing happened. Then she thought of the time when Jesus spit on the ground to make mud and put it on the blind man's eyes. She felt that if she would do the same, the blind lady would be healed. However, they were standing on a carpeted floor and there was not any dirt nearby. But the bigger obstacle was her fear of doing something so socially unacceptable—putting her spit and dirt in someone's eyes! Yet Jesus did it. She felt guilty for having fear. And the guiltier she felt, the more she felt He was leading her to do it. But was He? Was her hesitation due to her fear of looking foolish or to uncertainty about the leading? In the end, she didn't spit and the blind lady did not see. Now she was being tormented with guilt for not applying the mud. This unhappy encounter had happened at a conference in a foreign country, making it impractical for her to go back and pray again for the blind person using the mud method.

She asked me, "What should I have done? Was the impulse to make mud with my saliva from the Lord or from myself?"

I told her that I didn't think it was from the Lord. First, it is natural for us to think of biblical passages that correspond to our prayers for people. When I pray for blind people, the mud and spit therapy of John 9:6 almost always comes to my mind. When I pray for deaf people, I frequently wonder if I should put my fingers in their ears (see Mark 7:32). Those thoughts probably come from our familiarity with the Scriptures, not from specific divine leading. Second, when we are praying unsuccessfully for a miracle, it is natural for us to search for a reason for our failure. We may think that we are not following the Bible literally enough, or that

we don't have enough faith, or that there is sin in our life. Third, the lady did not have certainty or peace about doing something so distasteful. She was more worried about missing God's leading than she was about obeying God; she would have been happy to obey if she really knew it was God leading her. Remember that when God commanded the prophets of the Bible to do something weird, He did it with such clarity that they did not wonder whether the command came from Him or from their emotions. Fourth, this lady was relatively new at hearing God's voice and she was contemplating a prophetic act beyond her level of faith (see Rom. 12:6). These were the factors that persuaded me to conclude that her emotions had been leading her to apply the mud, not God. And because there was no clear transgression, she did not need to feel guilty.

What should she have done? She could have asked God to give her a sign that the leading was from Him and not from her emotions. Or she could have included the blind lady in the decision by saying, "You'll probably think this is crazy, and I don't blame you, but I feel like doing what Jesus did—making mud with my saliva and putting it on your eyes. What do you think?" The blind lady might have said, "No way!" or she might have said, "Well, what have I got to lose? My eyes are no good to me now anyway. Give it a try." In this way, she would have been treating the blind lady as a person and not an experiment.

Who Prophesies on Sunday Morning?

Have you ever gone to church on Sunday morning and heard the leadership say, "Who would like to give the

sermon this morning?" Why haven't you ever heard that? Because everyone knows the craziness that would bring into the church. Yet that is exactly the way some churches practice prophecy. They have a two to five minute programmed pause after the worship where anyone may "prophesy."

In one Sunday night church service of about 2,000 people, during the programmed pause I heard a man say that the gospel was a fairy tale! The pastor got up and said, "Our gospel is not a fairy tale." Everyone cheered. Later, I was told that the man had a weekend pass from a mental institution. No real damage was done, but no one was built up or encouraged by his words. And that is the problem with allowing anyone to prophesy to the whole church on Sunday morning—it is just not that helpful to the whole church. Most of the people who speak are not really prophesying, nor do they have authority to address the whole church. I have watched churches try to do prophetic ministry in this way for years and have never seen it build a strong prophetic ministry in the church. This method teaches people to ignore—or worse—despise prophetic ministry. Why?

We don't just let anyone give the Sunday morning sermon. Our expectations for the sermon are too high to just let anyone give a message to the whole church. The one who teaches us on Sunday morning must have a certain level of character and a certain level of teaching ability. Why not set the same standards for those who prophesy to the whole church on Sunday morning? Raise the bar instead of lowering it. Paul suggests this when he seems to limit the number of prophets to two or three who may

speak in the meetings (see 1 Cor. 14:29). Sunday morning is the time for the expression of our most mature gifts. It is not the time where people learn how to teach or prophesy.

Someone might object that letting only the mature prophets address the whole church is quenching the Spirit or putting out the fire of the Spirit (see 1 Thess. 5:19). But just the opposite is true. We are trying to ensure that what is said really does come from the Spirit. I'm not saying that God would never give a word to the whole church through an inexperienced prophet. I'm just saying that He does not do that normally. Anyone who thinks he or she has a revelation for the whole church is always free to ask one of the elders for permission to speak. If the elder thinks it is appropriate, he or she may allow the person to speak, or one of those leading the service may give the word.

Restricting Sunday morning prophetic ministry to the most mature prophets does not mean that we will only have a few prophets in the church. Paul's comments in 1 Corinthians 14 lead us to believe that the gift of prophecy should be widely distributed in the church. He tells us to pursue spiritual gifts, especially prophecy (see v. 1). Furthermore, the church was born in prophetic fire, and Peter says that prophetic experiences should be normal for the church (see Acts 2:17-21). James leads us to believe that the gift of teaching will be much rarer than the gift of prophecy when he says, "Not many of you should presume to be teachers . . ." (Jas. 3:1). In my church, I find this to be exactly the case. We have many more prophets than teachers.

How do people learn to prophesy if only few can address the whole body on Sunday morning? They learn in home groups, training classes, seminars and conferences, small men's groups, or women's groups. After being trained, people can serve on our ministry teams. After each service, we always have a minimum of nine or ten teams of three who prophesy and pray for healing.

Some of the most wonderful prophetic words that I know about have been given on Sunday mornings in an informal way. I was touched by this one. Two ladies from another city decided to visit our Sunday morning service. On Saturday, a husband of one of the ladies told her that he didn't love her anymore and wanted a divorce. She said it was the worst day of her life. She still came to our service the next day. One of our young women saw her across the room and began to hear God speaking to her about the lady. She went over and introduced herself to the lady and said something like this: "I think God has been speaking to me about you. He wants you to know that He really loves you. He's going to walk with you through the darkness. He said that it is not your fault, and that He will make this up to you." I got an email two days later from one of the ladies. The lady who had received the word said that it was one of the most encouraging things that had ever happened to her. She said that she didn't even get the young woman's name who prophesied over her, but it didn't matter because she knew that it was Jesus who had spoken.

So, in our church we have three expressions of prophetic ministry on Sunday morning. Two or three prophets will address the whole church from the stage. We have about six to eight people who can do this well, but only

two or three do it during the service. At the next level, we have ministry teams that pray over people at the end of each service. Finally, a number of our people will give prophetic words one on one informally. This procedure eliminates some of the craziness unstructured prophetic ministry allows, and it also helps us to be more accountable for what we say.

Ten Rules for Prophetic Success

If we obey the following 10 rules, we may avoid some unnecessary trouble.

Rule 1: Emphasize the main and the plain, not the rare and the bizarre. Do this in your Scripture study and in your prophetic ministry.

Rule 2: Don't do anything strange without a *clear* leading from God.

Rule 3: Don't do anything prophetically that is potentially embarrassing or harmful to another person without his or her permission. If you object, "Elijah and Elisha did not have to get permission before they did harmful things," remember: They were prophesying against God's enemies. You are ministering to His children. That is a big difference. Also remember that you are not Elijah or Elisha. When you get to their level of commitment and skill, you can have a little more latitude with rule 3.

Rule 4: Repeat after me: "I am not an exception to the rules. I am a beginner in the school of the prophets."

Rules 5 through 10: See Rule 4.

Strive to be as normal and unreligious as possible if you want your message to be received. That was the

apostle Paul's advice (see 1 Cor. 14:23-25). Do things decently and in order, for God is a God of peace (see 1 Cor. 14:33,40). If He wants to violate the peace, fine. But we should work to keep it.

The next chapter offers some guidelines not only for keeping the peace but also for obtaining the maximum benefit from our prophetic words.

Chapter Seven

Giving Prophetic Messages

The word "dreams" flashed into my mind as I looked at a lady in the third row. That was it, just the word "dreams." I felt that I was supposed to speak to the lady, but the word was just too general. I needed to improve it. In front of everyone, I asked her if she had been praying to have dreams. In front of everyone, she said no.

About five minutes later, she raised her hand. She told us that she had read one of my books about two weeks previous and had starting having vivid dreams. She did not have anyone to talk to about what was happening to her. She asked God to let us meet so that she could ask me about the meaning of her dreams. She had no idea I was coming to her city. She found out about the meeting just in time to attend that day.

This was a divine appointment, and the Lord had even given me the subject of our meeting: her dreams. I almost spoiled it by trying to improve a general word. I should have simply said to her, "When I looked at you, the word 'dreams' flashed into my mind. Does that mean anything to you?" Then she could have told her story. How much more powerful that would have been!

Realizing the Power of a General Word

I failed to appreciate the power of the general word I had been given and thought I could improve it by making it

more specific. I was actually adding to the revelation I had received. Sometimes we do this because we think that people value specific words more than general ones, and of course, we want them to value what we say. Sometimes we are tempted to add a few specific details to make us appear more powerful. But don't do it. If the general word is from the Lord, it will have power. Adding to it will only dilute or ruin it.

"Leprosy." The word popped into my mind out of nowhere. But what in the world could it mean? I was seated at a conference table with 20 Christians. Most were Church leaders, but some were leaders from the fields of business, entertainment and media. We had decided to close the meeting by praying for one another when "leprosy" captured my attention. I asked the Lord what it meant and to whom it applied, but got no answer.

I was sure that the word was from the Lord. There were two men from Israel sitting at the table, and my best guess was that it applied to one of them in some way. I thought about asking them, but I felt just the slightest hesitation to do so. After about 10 minutes, I asked the group, "Does 'leprosy' mean anything to anyone here?" No one said anything for a minute. Then a banker who was also an investor spoke up. He said that he had recently invested in a leper colony in India. Even though it was a for-profit investment, it was compassion that moved him to make the investment that gave a business to a leper colony of over 700 people. Three of us prayed over the businessman about his investment and some other things in his life. Later that night I had dinner with him, and he told me that whole experience was

extremely powerful for him. Just the single word "leprosy" and the prayer following confirmed a direction he was taking in his business and let him know that the Lord was pleased with him.

Words from the Lord are powerful even when they are general and even when we have to ask to whom they apply.

Observing the Golden Rule

The greatest Prophet once said, "Bless those who curse you" (Luke 6:28). The few who actually do that are entrusted with the greatest of God's secrets, for God knows that they won't use His secrets for revenge, but rather as tools of mercy and love for reshaping damaged lives.

If someone saw a sin in your life, what would you want them to do? Would you want that person to call it out Sunday morning in front of the whole church? Would you want that person to tell friends what they had seen about you? That might make him look like a powerful prophet to some, but what would it do to you?

Those who want to look like great prophets always end up needlessly hurting others. Real prophets not only see our secrets, they are also full of mercy. They know that God first uses kindness to lead us to repentance, and they follow His example (see Rom. 2:4). Truly great prophets treat people as they want to be treated (see Luke 6:31). When they have a warning or blessing for someone, they ponder how to give it so that it will achieve the maximum benefit to all. And they don't just consider the way in which to deliver the message, but the timing of its delivery as well.

Getting the Timing Right

We may have a real revelation with the right interpretation, then deliver the message without any benefit being realized because we give it at the wrong time. A wise prophet knows that "a word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver" (Prov. 25:11), a work of art that brings joy to the speaker and good to the hearer (see Prov. 15:23).

Never give a prophetic word to someone without asking and receiving the Lord's permission first. I am often asked, "How do we know if we have the Lord's permission to give the word?" The answer is, He will tell us if we ask Him. Why would God give us a revelation and not instruct us how to use it? If we had the capacity to receive the revelation, we also have the capacity to hear what to do with it.

We also need the Lord to show us how to apply the revelation, just as much as we need Him to give us the revelation and its interpretation. People are different, and therefore the same truth may need to be applied in different ways if it is going to benefit the hearer. An application that would needlessly provoke one person may be just right for another. The Holy Spirit must illumine each step of the process if we are ever to be a blessing to anyone.

Sometimes the Lord does not give the prophet an interpretation or application of a revelation, but He still has him speak the revelation. In this case, the Lord may be testing the hearts of the hearers to see if they value His word enough to seek Him for its meaning and application. We have to be careful not to say more than God has said. If we add anything, we should distinguish between the revelation and our own opinions regarding its mean-

ing and application. Our opinion may be valuable, but if we carelessly lead our hearers to believe it is what God has said, it will probably be deceptive.

Being Kind

The Lord's kindness is the standard for all prophetic ministry. When we give people words from Him, we should make them feel at ease. Smile at them. Call them by name. Always give prophetic words with tenderness and humility. We want people to feel the Lord's kindness and love through us.

Angry, self-righteous, judgmental and accusatory messages rarely do anyone any good. I know that the Old Testament prophets frequently spoke angry words from God. These words were spoken to a rebellious people given over to idolatry or to religious hypocrisy. Jesus reserved His angry words for self-righteous, hypocritical, religious leaders (see Matt. 23). If God has an angry message for the Church today, I would expect it to come the way it has always come: from a humble, broken-hearted prophet who loves the Church and identifies with its sin, and who moves at the highest level of revelation (see Dan. 9:4-19). Yet most of the angry "prophetic" words I hear today flow out of a stream of unhealed anger in the prophet's heart.

Give all messages, especially negative ones, with gentleness and tact. Don't just blurt out to a husband that his pride, selfishness, insensitivity and blindness will ruin his marriage. He won't receive it. He'll think you are just attacking him, taking his wife's side. Instead, say something like, "I know that your wife is angry and depressed.

But I can see the devil is using her unhappiness to set a trap for you. He's going to try to make you think that you have nothing to do with her unhappiness, that all the serious problems in your marriage are really her fault. If you fall into the trap, you'll end up miserable for life or divorced. I think the Lord has shown me how you can escape the trap, if you care to hear it." A message shaped liked this has a chance of being heard and saving a marriage.

All prophets would do well to ask the Holy Spirit to write the following proverbs on their hearts:

A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger (Prov. 15:1).

Through patience a ruler can be persuaded, and a gentle tongue can break a bone (Prov. 25:15).

If we frame our messages tactfully and avoid frontal attacks on a person's character, our words are more likely to find a home in the hearts of our hearers.

Interceding

In the center of heaven, there are hundreds of millions of angels. In the midst of the angels are 24 thrones with 24 elders sitting on them. In the midst of the thrones are four living creatures flying around a single throne, which is encircled by an emerald rainbow. In the center of that throne, in the very center of heaven, sits the Lord Jesus Christ. The whole heavenly entourage gazes on the beauty of that glorious Person and sings His praises non-stop (see Rev. 4-5). What is *He* doing?

He does not let the splendor of angelic adoration distract Him from His main task. Hour after hour, He labors in prayer for you and for me and for all those He is drawing to His Father (see Heb. 7:25). The greatest Prophet is also the greatest Priest, and though He is all-knowing and all-powerful, He is still praying.

Following in the Spirit of Jesus, great prophets have always been great interceders. If we truly want our prophetic word to draw our hearers to God, then we should pray for them after we deliver the message.

Intercession is hard work. Actually, it is easier to do anything other than praying. But it may be our prayers, not our message, that the Lord uses to help the person. It is not our job to make the person accept the word, nor is it our job to make the word come to pass. After Isaiah delivered one of his most difficult messages of judgment, he said, "I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob. I will put my trust in him" (Isa. 8:17). Follow Isaiah's example, wait for the Lord and put your trust in Him so that you won't succumb to the Rejected Prophet Syndrome.

Withholding Words

Daniel was not only a prophet, he was a wise prophet (see Ezek. 28:3). When he received one of his most spectacular and troubling visions, he kept it to himself (see Dan. 7:28). He did not need to prove that he was a spectacular prophet by sharing the vision, even among his intimate circle. He did not get upset when God gave him a vision and then refused to let him share it. He knew the reward

was the same for sharing or withholding revelation, as long as either was done in obedience to the Lord.

The discipline to be silent when God is silent or when He has withheld permission to speak is a sign of prophetic maturity. God does not reveal His secrets to blabbermouths but to those who fear Him (see Ps. 25:14). In heaven, a prophet may be known more for what he does not say than for what he does say. No one gets to the highest level of prophetic ministry without mastering the skill of prophetic restraint. These are the prophets who can be trusted with revelation that is not yet ripe for sharing, that must be "sealed" for a later use (see Isa. 8:16; 29:11; Dan. 8:26; 12:4,9). These are the prophets to whom God can show great secrets, then trust them never to repeat what they heard or saw to anyone (see 2 Cor. 12:4; Rev. 10:4). These are the trusted friends of God who have His interests at heart, not their own.

Why would God show a prophet something and not give him permission to share it? Perhaps He is calling the prophet to intercede instead of prophesy. In fact, *unless the Lord says otherwise, every revelation is also a call to prayer*. Maybe the timing for the message is not yet right. Sometimes the Lord gives a message in stages, and the prophet who speaks a partial message as if it were the whole message may lead someone astray.

It is also possible that we may see accurately what someone is planning to do, but not what God actually wants that person to do. If we speak without God's permission, we may confirm man's plans rather than God's. In that case, we will have become part of the deception instead of part of the deliverance.

Saying "Thus Says the Lord"

Should you introduce your prophetic message by saying, "Thus says the Lord"? The Old Testament prophets frequently did. The New Testament counterpart is, "The Holy Spirit says" (Acts 21:11). When the prophets used this phrase, they were claiming to speak the precise words of God, not their interpretations or applications of the revelation they had received. "Thus says the Lord" allowed no debate. It meant, "This is exactly what God has said. The matter is settled." The prophets who used this phrase were not usually speaking words of personal prophecy. They had been given divine authority to speak God's words over nations. They had proven character and track records. Most were persecuted, and some became martyrs. In my opinion, we should be quick to copy their passion for God and slower to use their vocabulary.

When we say "thus says the Lord" to someone, we have left the person no room to disagree. He or she may feel controlled or manipulated because it is intuitively obvious, even if they can't express it, that we don't have the same authority as the prophets who spoke over nations. I am not saying that it is always wrong to use "thus says the Lord," just that most of us using it do not have the authority to use it. Even the prophets I know who have the most authority rarely use the phrase.

On the other hand, I know good prophets who disagree with me on this issue. They use the phrase constantly when they prophesy. And I'm not going to let their style of prophesying cause me to lose the blessing of their friendship or ministry.

Grandiose Prophecies

A trend that I have noticed among some gifted prophets is to consistently couch prophetic words in grandiose terms. In a recent church service, I heard a very experienced prophetess tell a lady that God would use her "to change nations." Perhaps that was true, but I felt uneasy about it. Of course, any of us who pray regularly for nations may play a part in changing them. But I don't think that is the way the lady or the church received the word. "Change the nations" calls to mind the apostle Paul, not a faithful prayer warrior on her knees.

A consistent diet of grandiose prophecies produces sickness in the Church for several reasons. First, there simply have never been that many people of Paul's stature in the Church. After a while, when we see all these words falling to the ground, we may start ignoring prophetic words or, worse, despising them. Second, an inflated word can have an inflating effect on the person who receives it. I've seen this happen more than once (see the story at the beginning of chapter 8). Third, when we tell people that they are going to do something incredible or that they have incredible character, we may be leading them to believe that their significance lies in their performance or character. This is what the devil wants us to believe, and it is what makes his accusing ministry so successful (see Rev. 12:10). The real reason why we are significant is because an Infinite, Perfect Person loves us. According to Paul, our stability comes from experiencing His infinite love (see Eph. 3:14-21). Remember that "the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Rev. 19:10). Therefore, we want all our prophetic words directing people to His greatness, not our greatness.

Prophetic Authority

Prophetic words are always subject to the authority of Scripture. In the Old Testament, even if a prophetic word came true and was confirmed by miraculous signs, it was not to be followed if it contradicted the teaching of Scripture (see Deut. 13:1-5). During Isaiah's time, people consulted mediums and spiritists. Isaiah set forth a standard to distinguish the true prophet from the false: "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn" (Isa. 8:20).

Paul addressed the same problem in Corinth, where some claimed that they were led to ignore his teaching due to their own prophetic inspiration. He wrote, "If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command" (1 Cor. 14:37). The authority of Scripture is universal, for all people and for all times. Personal revelation, on the other hand, is only for the people to whom it is given and only for that particular time.

How much authority should we assign to personal prophetic words? Should we expect someone to base a decision on a prophetic word that we have given? Jeremiah certainly expected the people to base their decision on his prophetic word. When the people asked him whether they should stay in Judah or flee to Egypt, he said the Lord would only protect them if they stayed in Judah (see Jer. 42). The people did not listen, and most of them died under judgment in Egypt. But we would be wrong to use Jeremiah or any of the Old Testament prophets as our normal model for the authority of today's personal prophetic words.

Here's why: The Old Testament examples of prophetic ministry do not include very many instances of prophets giving "personal" words. Almost all the examples deal with prophets giving corporate words. Even the prophets' personal words to the king were actually corporate words, because their purpose was to help the king guide the nation. And it would be an error to use corporate examples as a model for personal words. In a corporate word, the prophets represented the voice of God to a nation that acknowledged Him as their only ruler. In the example above, Jeremiah was not speaking to an individual to give him some guidance about where he should live; he was speaking to the remnant of the rebellious nation, telling them the only way God would allow their survival.

God used the prophets to say things that neither the king nor the nation wanted to believe. In order to help the people believe, He established the prophets' authority in unforgettable ways. He came down in a cloud to speak with Moses in front of all the people (see Exod. 19:9). He caused the waters of the Jordan to stop and stand up in a heap so that the people would follow Joshua into the Promised Land (see Josh. 3:7-17). He gave extraordinary accuracy to Samuel so that none of his words fell to the ground (see 1 Sam. 3:19). He confirmed Elijah's words by withholding rain for three and a half years and by granting him the power to call down fire from heaven (see 1 Kings 17:1; 18:36-38). Divine visitations, signs from nature, great accuracy, miracles and other supernatural experiences were the calling cards of the Old Testament prophets.

When Jesus came, He gave this authority to the apostles, not to the prophets. The authority structure of the

Church differs from that of the nation Israel. The apostles, not prophets, have translocal authority in the Body of Christ. The New Testament apostles gave corporate words to the whole Church. God revealed to each apostle where his sphere of authority lay, and the Church recognized that authority. Peter had authority among the Jews. Paul's sphere was among the Gentiles. New Testament prophets differed from their Old Testament counterparts by having a much greater ministry in personal rather than corporate words. Prophets in the Church speak to individuals for their comfort, encouragement and strengthening (see Acts 15:32; 1 Cor. 14:3). They can also give corporate words (see Acts 11:27-30), but the New Testament emphasizes their ministry to individuals.

On the local level, the elders of individual churches, not the prophets, have authority. Most New Testament prophets are not elders or leaders. Paul wrote that it is "the elders who direct the affairs of the church" (1 Tim. 5:17). And here is a critical point: *All New Testament authority is given to direct the affairs of the Church, not people's personal lives.* When the leaders of a church or a Christian movement start to exert authority over the personal lives of their followers, they are on the road that leads to a cult. Neither prophets nor pastors should be making our personal decisions for us.

Jesus has given us a more intimate relationship to the Father than the saints of the Old Testament were able to experience. The normal experience for us is to hear His voice (see John 10:4). We have the Holy Spirit to lead us (see Rom. 8:14). He expects us to hear from the Spirit regarding our personal decisions. This does not mean that

prophets cannot help. They can support, confirm or clarify what we think the Lord is saying to us. They can cause us to pray about directions we had not thought about. But they should never cause us to give up our privilege of hearing God's voice for ourselves. We should never act solely on someone else's light. God will hold each of us accountable for our decisions. He will never allow us to excuse our bad decisions by saying, "It was that prophet You gave me!"

This does not mean that New Testament prophets do not speak powerful and authoritative words. In fact, at the end of the age there will be a prophetic revival. The two most powerful prophets are yet to come, and their authority will be established like that of the prophets of old (see Rev. 11:3-12). Even now, there are indications that God is preparing the Church to receive a higher level of prophetic ministry.

Respecting Pastoral Authority

Recently I met a young man at a conference who was kind, sincere and prophetically gifted. He felt his church had fallen into a rut and that the Lord had shown him the way out. He told the pastor that he should shut the church down for a month so that they could all really learn how to do church. He could not understand why the pastor rejected him and his word.

I have no doubt that the young man saw some wrong patterns of ministry in his church, but his failure to respect the authority of his pastor undermined the effectiveness of any message he might have heard from the

Lord. How did he fail to respect pastoral authority? First, he gave a major correction without tact. He gave no thought to the impact of his message on the pastor. He did not realize that he was telling his pastor that his entire previous ministry at the church was severely flawed. This was not a proper way to approach someone who had been given not only authority to direct the affairs of the church (see 1 Tim. 5:17), but also authority to watch over the young man's soul (see Heb. 13:17).

Second, he gave a message he had no authority to give. Messages that involve radical redirection of a ministry are usually entrusted to prophets who have a proven supernatural track record and acknowledged divine authority. The young man had neither. The beginner prophet was a successful businessman who had never received any ministerial or prophetic training. I asked how he would like it if someone with no business experience told him to shut down his business for a month so that he could really learn how to do business. He got the picture, but he got it too late. The damage already had been done.

And yet he is a good man with a real gift, able to take correction. I would love to have him in my church to train him and put him to work. He just needs a better understanding of God's authority.

The purpose of divine authority is different from earthly authority: It is given to lead people into a deeper intimacy with Jesus, not to control them. Unlike earthly authority, it is given differently. Divine authority eludes those who seek it, leaves those who abuse it and rests on those who rest in the Word.