

# 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

## Chapter Four

# Discerning God's Voice

"You're going to die before your time." That's what the voice told her, and had been telling her for a long time. I also "heard" that voice as I looked at the section of the audience in which she was sitting. But whose voice was it? Was it God trying to prepare her for an untimely death? Was it guilt rising out the darkness of her secret sins? Was it her mother speaking to her from the grave of a premature death? Or was it the voice of darkness itself: powerless to take life, but an expert at defiling life? The voice had power over her because she believed it was telling the truth. I believed the voice was lying.

I pointed at her section and said, "Someone sitting over here believes that you are going to die before your time, but you're not. Would you please raise your hand. We want to pray for you." As it turned out, she was not the only person in the room that night that had been hearing this voice. For some it was just an occasional thought. For others it was a nagging thought. And yet for others it was a certainty. I knew it was not God warning them of an early death, and I knew that the power this voice had over them was supposed to end that night. But how did I know? How do you know when it is God speaking in your spirit or an entirely different voice speaking in your spirit?

## Four Tests

God is not the only one who speaks to us. Our own thoughts and emotions speak to us. The pressure we feel from others speaks to us as well. The devil also speaks to us (see Rev. 12:10). All these voices! How can we discern whether it is really God speaking? Here are four tests that help. But you will need more than these four tests.

### The Bible

The world is going to end. Everyone knows that. But *when* it will is the subject of no little theological and scientific debate. Someone, using mathematical calculations based on the Bible, predicted the rapture would occur in September 1988. He acquired a significant number of followers in spite of the fact that Jesus said, "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Matt. 24:36).

The coming of the year 2000 and Y2K fears also led some to predict an exact date for the second coming. One well-known teacher used the numerical values of Hebrew letters in combination with the fact that many older computer programs used 9999 as an exit command, to suggest that the rapture would occur on September 9, 1999 (9-9-99). In his article, he even quoted Matthew 24:36, reminding his readers that no one really knew the date of the rapture. However, his article was clearly speculating that it was coming on September 9, 1999.

Speculating about the timing of an event that has been declared unknowable by an Omniscient Being has never been a very productive use of time. But by paying

closer attention to what the Bible has to say, many people have been saved from more than merely wasting time.

When the apostle Paul came to Berea preaching Christ in the Jewish synagogue, for example, the Bereans "examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11). Their willingness to scrutinize the Scriptures saved their lives, forever. We are to follow the example of the noble Bereans. The Bible is the first test through which our subjective experience must pass. If my impression contradicts the Bible, then I discard it.

You would think that Bible believers would never accept something as true if it contradicts the Bible, but they do it all the time. For example, young Christians marry unbelievers all the time, convinced that God has given His blessing, even though the Bible says not to do it (see 2 Cor. 6:14). If we want something badly enough, we can always find a reason why we are an exception to the rule.

Yet Jesus said, "The Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). To my knowledge, there are no clear instances of God's breaking His word. He does not tell us to do what the Bible forbids. God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac is sometimes cited as an exception to this principle, but careful study shows that it is not (see *Surprised by the Voice of God*, p. 374, note 1). Although the voice of God may contradict one of our interpretations of Scripture, it will never contradict the Bible, no matter what our hearts tell us.

### Its Character

Here is the rest of the story of the lady I told you about at the beginning of this chapter. For 12 years, she woke up

every day thinking that she was supposed to die that day. It never occurred to her that the voice telling her this was the voice of a consummate liar.

I met her at a conference in another country. While I was speaking, I had an impression that certain individuals in the audience felt they were going to die before their time. She was one of the ladies that came forward for prayer.

She had red hair and was in her mid-30s. She looked as if she should be enjoying life, but instead was just enduring it.

"Do you think you are going to die prematurely?" I asked her.

"Yes. That is what I think God is telling me."

"Do you think your children are going to die before their time, too?"

"Yes," she said as she burst into sobs.

"That's not God speaking to you," I told her.

"How do you know?"

"How does the voice make you feel?"

"Hopeless."

"That's why it can't be God. His words bring hope, not despair. How long has the voice been telling you that you and your children are going to die soon?"

"Twelve years."

"That's another reason we know the voice is lying. Twelve years is not soon."

I believe the lady was set free from the tormenting voice that night. The voice threatening a premature death is a common trap. Christians fall into it all the time because we have not learned to recognize the character of the Lord's voice. It isn't as though He never tells people

that they are close to death; He told the apostle Paul that the time for his departure had come (see 2 Tim. 4:6). But the words produced joy and peace in him, not hopelessness and terror. God reserves His terrifying words for those in rebellion against Him. He speaks encouraging words to His weak and immature children who may be stumbling, but who are stumbling toward Him.

If we read the Bible with the illumination of the Holy Spirit, we will learn to recognize the character of the Lord's voice. In the Scripture we see that when Jesus speaks to His followers, He does not condemn, nag or whine. His voice is calm, quiet and authoritative. Even His warnings and rebukes bring hope.

If it is really the wisdom of the Lord that is coming to us, it should bring peace if we truly listen (see Jas 3:17; Phil. 4:6-7; John 16:33). The voice of the devil does just the opposite: He accuses and condemns us in order to steal our hope and faith (see Rev. 12:10). Voices have different characters. Learn the character of each voice that speaks to you before you attribute it to God.

### Its Fruit

What kind of fruit does the inner voice produce when you follow it? Jesus said that we could tell the difference between false and true prophets by the fruit of their ministries (see Matt. 7:15-23). In the same way, if we are following the voice of the Lord, we will see the fruit of the Spirit in our own lives, even if people reject our ministry.

Pay attention to the results of the different voices that you follow. Keep records. What happens when you follow the voice of anger, the voice that says, *God will judge*

*your opponent?* What happens when you follow the voice of greed, the voice that says, *You have to have it now?* What happens when you follow the voice of fear, the voice that says, *You just can't?*

If we are following the voice of God, we can expect to experience the fruit of the Spirit, especially peace (see Phil. 4:9).

### Its Difference

There are two verses in the Bible that are disbelieved by Bible believers in every age. Those who fail to believe these verses may also fail to hear much of what God is saying to them. I am referring to Isaiah 55:8-9: "‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the Lord. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.’”

Most of us Christians would say we agree with this, but the way we agree with it is this: “That’s right, Lord, they don’t think like *we* do, do they?” The truth is we believe it for someone else. We tend to think it is the other person who does not understand God’s ways.

If God’s thoughts and acts differ enormously from ours, two indisputable facts follow. First, the most important things in life can only be understood by divine revelation. The unaided human intellect, no matter how brilliant, will not be able to penetrate the ways of God. Second, when the divine revelation comes, it may seem wrong to us initially.

When Jesus told the disciples that He would be crucified and raised three days later, Peter said, “Never, Lord!”

Peter was saying that this was a bad plan. It was the opposite of what should happen. No matter how many times Jesus told the disciples about the cross, they could not understand or accept it. If His best friends could not understand His cross, what about the rest of the world?

The Greeks and Romans thought the message about the cross was utter nonsense. Crucifixion was reserved for the lowest criminal; it was illegal to crucify a Roman citizen, no matter what his crime. There was no example either in Greek or in Roman mythology of a crucified god. A crucified god was a contradiction in terms. What god would ever submit to such humiliation? The Jews could not accept the message of the cross, because one who hung on a cross was cursed according to Deuteronomy 21:22-23. They thought it was impossible for God to bring Himself under a curse. The cross of Jesus contradicted human wisdom and experience, and even the scholars’ understanding of the Bible. After 2,000 years, the cross is still a mystery that is only partially understood.

As the mystery of the cross demonstrates, it is normal for God to come to us in a form that makes it difficult to recognize Him and in a way that makes it easy to reject Him. How could it be otherwise when we are relating to our Creator, who is infinitely superior to us in every way?

Our inability to recognize Him and His ways is one of the reasons He sends us prophets. And if we want to be prophets, we must pay close attention to the thoughts that come to us out of nowhere with a message that contradicts our normal ways of thinking or acting.

These four tests—Scripture, its character, its fruit and its content—help us to recognize God’s voice. But they

can never be used as a mechanical check list. Nor can they be a substitute for experience. Through experience, we can grow in our ability to hear God. "But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil" (Heb. 5:14).

I listened to an excellent explanation of a golf swing recently. Then I was stupefied when I watched the explainer swing a golf club. As an explainer he was great. But as a player . . .

I had a similar experience reading a book about prayer. I admired the illustrations and some of the reasoning about prayer, but about three chapters into the book, I knew that the author had had very little experience praying. He was trying to offer an intellectual explanation of prayer without a convincing personal history of prayer. Knowing *about* God's voice is not the same as knowing God's voice.

How about you? Are you constantly asking God's opinion? It is through "constant use" that we grow in discernment, in our ability to hear His voice. No one gets a great golf swing without a lot of practice. The same is true for those who want to hear God's voice.

We've all seen people who have practiced a lot at something and are still not very good at it. Sometimes it means that they simply don't have the talent for what they are practicing, whether it is music, a sport or a technical skill. But according to Jesus, all Christians have the ability to hear His voice (see John 10:27).

Sometimes if we practice the wrong way we can actually set ourselves back. Every beginning golfer has heard his instructor say, "Practice doesn't make perfect. It makes

permanent." Practicing while neglecting the foundational things can actually make flaws permanent. When it comes to hearing God's voice, the key lies not in the four tests, or even in a lot of practice, but rather in our heart. Neglecting the role of our heart is a sure way to being deceived. The key to hearing God lies not in our intelligence but in our humility.

## The Humble Heart

God repeatedly tells us how much He values humility. "This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word" (Isa. 66:2). There are actually people that God Himself esteems. This is an amazing fact in itself, but *who* He esteems is even more amazing. He does not esteem the rich, the beautiful or the intelligent; He esteems the humble. David tells us this: "Though the LORD is on high, he looks upon the lowly, but the proud he knows from afar" (Ps. 138:6). Peter tells us this: "All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.' Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time" (1 Pet. 5:5-6).

The Scripture declares that the humble hear and understand the voice of God. Among all the Old Testament prophets, no one heard the voice of the Lord like Moses, for he was "more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3-8). In fact, humility is one of the main character qualities of all the great prophets. Humility is the pathway to friendship with God. It is very simple:

God deals with the proud at a distance, but with the humble it's up close and personal. I've never heard a pastor or theologian dispute this. I've also never heard a sermon or a theological lecture on humility. I've heard lots of sermons on faithfulness, service, purity, giving, judgment, grace, mercy, obedience, prayer, meditation and spiritual gifts, but I can't remember ever hearing humility talked about.

Jonathan Edwards said that the hardest sin to detect and the one that lies at the bedrock of most of our other sins is pride. If that's true, I wonder if the opposite could not be said about humility: It is the most difficult virtue to acquire. Humility is the virtue to which our flesh is most opposed, because it is the soil from which so many other virtues grow. One thing is for sure: Everyone who is famous for loving God throughout scriptural history is also exceptionally humble.

## What Is Humility?

The dictionaries often begin by telling us what humility is *not*—not proud, not arrogant, not haughty, not assertive and not pretentious. But what *is* it? The Bible does not give us one simple definition of humility, but it does offer a number of different portraits of humble people.

First, humble people are small in their own eyes. This is what the prophet Samuel said to King Saul (see 1 Sam. 15:17). Does “small in our own eyes” mean taking a negative view of ourselves, believing that we are worthless and insignificant? Not at all. Consider John the Baptist, who knew he was special. His conception was announced ahead of time by the angel Gabriel, one of only two angels

named in Scripture (see Luke 1:11-20). His birth was celebrated by one of the most powerful prophetic words in the Bible (see Luke 1:67-79). He knew that he had been given the greatest privilege of all the prophets. He knew he was the “voice” of Isaiah 40:3, the forerunner of the Messiah. John knew he was special, yet he was still humble, small in his own eyes.

Humility is not the denial of our attributes; it is believing in our hearts that our best qualities are not good enough to cause us to deserve God's attention, or even to gain us the lowest position of service to Him. John knew that he was great, but in comparison with the Messiah, he said that he was not worthy to perform the lowest act of service: to take the Messiah's shoes off (see John 1:27). Humility is seeing ourselves not in comparison with one another, but in the light of God's greatness.

Second, humble people know it is not their physical strength, nor their intelligence, nor their luck, but the Lord who determines the outcome (see Prov. 21:31; 16:9,23). When John the Baptist's disciples came to him complaining that more people were going to Jesus than John, the prophet replied, “A man can receive only what is given him from heaven” (John 3:27). Solomon said it like this: “Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain” (Ps. 127:1). Jesus emphasized this to His disciples the night before His crucifixion. He said, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

Third, humble people put their confidence in the mercy of God rather than in their abilities or character (see Rom. 9:15-16). Jesus illustrated this in the story of the proud Pharisee boasting about his righteousness

and the sinner crying out for mercy (see Luke 18:9-14). Another way to state this principle is that humble people put their confidence in the Holy Spirit's ability to speak, not in their ability to hear. Or humble people put their confidence in Jesus' ability to lead, not in their ability to follow. At the end of his life, Paul said it like this: "The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom" (2 Tim. 4:18).

Fourth, humble people are willing to associate with and serve people of lower position (see Rom. 12:10; Gal. 5:13; Phil. 2:3-4), just as Jesus (see Phil. 2:5-11) and our Father do (see Isa. 57:15; 66:2).

Last, humble people have learned to embrace their weaknesses. Paul tells us that the power of Christ rests on people who embrace their weaknesses (see 2 Cor. 12:9-10). A weakness in this sense is not a sin, nor is it the normal immaturity we leave behind as we grow closer to Christ. Weakness is the lack of strength or ability to do something that we consider desirable or necessary. It might be a physical disability such as a speech impediment, or a personality trait we don't like such as shyness.

The apostle Paul did not tell us what his weakness was, only that it was a tormenting, demonic "thorn" in his flesh (v. 7). Perhaps if he had named his specific weakness, we might have had the tendency to glorify his weakness and minimize our own. Many of us are distressed by our weaknesses, viewing them as permanent liabilities. But humble people see their weaknesses as opportunities for the power of Christ to rest on them.

If humility is so essential for hearing the voice of God, how do we get it? Not by reading about it.

## Becoming Humble

"Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered" (Heb. 5:8). That is surely one of the most unexpected statements about Jesus in the whole New Testament. It is difficult to think of a perfect Person "learning" anything, especially obedience. Who really understands how the humanity and deity of Jesus functions in His person? Yet somehow pain was necessary for Him and He benefited from it. If Jesus needed pain, how much more do we?

If you listen to some preachers today, you might get the idea that pain is never God's will for our lives. According to some, we suffer because of our unbelief. Sometimes that's true, but it wasn't true of Job and it certainly wasn't true of Jesus' suffering. God uses pain to train us. Whether He causes or permits it, or we cause it or our enemy causes it, is irrelevant in one sense. God could prevent all our pain if He chose to, but instead He chooses to use our pain, giving us the opportunity to become humble. Pain does not automatically produce humility; in some people pain produces bitterness. But no one becomes humble without pain doing its work. Often that pain takes the form of desert experiences.

Humility is almost always acquired in the desert. Moses, David, John the Baptist and Jesus all had significant training time in the desert. Likewise, everyone who is greatly used by the Lord is led into the "desert" to get humility. God even sent a whole nation to the desert for 40 years to humble them, to bring them to a place of childlike dependence and gratitude (see Deut. 8:1).

The desert is necessary because no human being has the character to bear perpetual success. Jesus had the

character, but His Father did not except Him from the rule. We need failure, pain and dryness to break the power of our pride. In this life, there is no cure for our pride. We are offered a daily reprieve based on the quality of our daily walk with Jesus. The desert is one of those places where we discover our absolute need of that walk.

Prophetic ministry is often spectacular. Prophets can dazzle an audience, even an entire nation. Because of that, it is easy for prophets to become puffed up. The desert is the cure for both personal and prophetic pride. The greater the prophetic gifting, the greater and more severe the time in the desert will be. Welcome the desert. It means the gift of humility is being imparted and that promotion or restoration is on the way.

Jesus said that no one on earth was greater than John the Baptist (see Matt. 11:11). Why? Because no one embraced humility like John. It was not just that John began in humility, small in his own eyes when he looked up to Jesus; he embraced humility even when it meant his ministry would diminish in the presence of Jesus. He said of Jesus, "He must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:30). He knew, at the height of his popularity, that the coming of Jesus meant the end of the forerunner's ministry. Others would have been offended at the loss of their ministry, but to John it seemed right. Where did he learn to respond so humbly? In the desert.

The desert represents that time in our lives when we seem unproductive and God seems far away. And if that weren't enough, a major test or temptation is thrown at us in the desert. The pain of the desert is where we learn that apart from Christ we can do nothing.

A second thing that helps us to grow in humility is being with humble people. It is a law of human nature that we will become like our friends (see Prov. 13:20), and this can be a problem, especially for men. The average Christian man will say that his wife is his best friend. In most cases his wife is his only friend. If you ask that same man who is his best male friend, he will usually tell you it is someone from his high school or college, someone that no longer lives in his city, and someone he rarely talks to. We have become increasingly isolated in modern culture, and we are the poorer for it.

God made us to connect with Him and with others at the deepest level. One of the greatest challenges facing the Church today is to create an environment conducive to the forming of deep friendships, rather than simply focusing on building a ministry. When the primary focus is building rather than connecting, we end up using people, assessing their value according to their ability to help us build *our* ministry. But before Jesus called the apostles to build a ministry, He called them to "be with him" (Mark 3:13-15). The most powerful ministries are built on a deep connection with God and with His people. Here's why.

All of us need one to three people of the same sex who are so close to us that they know all our secrets. Why? Because if you can't talk about it, it owns you. When I share a dark secret with a close friend, 50 percent of the power of that darkness over me is immediately broken. James said that if we want to be healed, it is necessary to confess our sins to one another (see Jas. 5:16). You can only do this consistently with the closest of friends, people who would never use your secrets to betray you.

Truly deep friendships are formed without ulterior motives. Best friends are best friends for one reason: They enjoy each other. And this brings us back to our ultimate purpose in life, to love God and one another (see Matt. 22:37-40).

Certainly loving includes serving and building, but we can build and serve without loving. We can even sacrifice our lives without loving (see 1 Cor. 13:3). But no one can enjoy God without loving Him (contrast Mary and Martha, see Luke 10:38-42). I think that the best measurement of our love for God is the level of our capacity to enjoy Him. The more we are actually "with" God, the more we enjoy Him. But here is the problem: It is so much easier to "do for" God than to "be with" God. Fear and insecurity lead us to so crowd our lives with doing that there is very little time left over for being with God or with best friends. And yet it is these friendships that give us real joy, allow us to feel significant and transform us. Every humble person in scriptural history is deeply connected with other humble people and growing their ability to enjoy God.

Humility is produced by pain, being with Jesus, being with humble people and is a life-long process (see Phil. 3:12-14).

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