

False Prophets

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Almighty God, we thank you for your word and we pray that you will write it on our hearts and bear much fruit for your glory in our lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen. How do you respond when you're strolling down the street and all of a sudden you come upon a miracle? Or you're wandering down the road and all of a sudden there in front of you is a fulfilled prophecy.

What do you think? What do you make of it? Is it from God or not? How do you decide? How can you determine whether some strange event, a supernatural event, a great healing, or a prediction that comes true, or somebody who demonstrates some act of apparent spiritual power, how do you decide if it's from God or not?

Generally, the two simple responses are these. The first is that we deny any miracle or supernatural event or paranormal phenomenon.

we think it's something to do with deceit or illusion and we try and find some natural explanation for it. And especially that's the case if it's performed by or in the context of somebody or people who are not Christians, outside a Christian context.

[1 : 33] How do we respond when we hear of visions of Mary at a place in Yugoslavia called Medjugorje? Many would say it's an illusion, a deceit.

It's nothing to do with God at all. How do we respond when somebody claims that somebody has predicted what will happen in their life?

Whether it's through a horoscope or some clairvoyant or something. Sometimes we dismiss it. We say it's a deceit or an illusion or a sham. Sometimes it's hard to convince those people who've received that prediction or seen that healing that that's the case.

But very often one response is to push it to the side and say it's not really true. It didn't really happen. It's an illusion. It's not a miracle. It doesn't come from God.

Another response may be that wherever we see a miracle or a prophecy or prediction fulfilled, there we see God and God's power and truth.

[2 : 44] So when we hear of visions or voices of Mary or something else at Medjugorje, people flock there because they think here is God doing something extraordinary and powerful.

And when we hear of somebody being healed, even if it's outside a Christian context, well, it must be God at work. And when we hear of people who say that somebody's told them the future and predicted it for them, we think somehow God's at work.

They're the two simple responses. One is to dismiss them all and one is to accept them all. The first is not from God. The second is from God. But is it really so simple?

Is it really that every supernatural event or paranormal phenomenon or miraculous healing or prediction or prophecy that comes true is either all from God or none from God?

Often I think Christians face some confusion over these sorts of events. Those two responses are the simple and the extremes. But what about in between?

[3 : 49] How can we assess these sorts of things rightly and not be led astray? Sometimes people's responses if they occur within the church or within a Christian context then they must be from God.

And if they occur outside of that context then they can't be from God. And yet very often that leads to more confusion. Sometimes our assessment will be whether it brings good or not.

So a healing which obviously brings good must be from God. But again I think those tests are inadequate in the end for assessing whether something is of God or not.

If prophets or those who divine by dreams appear among you and promise you omens or portents and the omens or portents declared by them take place that's the situation being addressed in

Deuteronomy 13.

Not only does somebody come and announce something but what they say comes true. Whether it's a healing or a prediction or a prophecy or whatever what happens comes true.

[5 : 03] Then how do you assess the situation? Even if what happens is good there is still a question mark about the evaluation of it. Because this chapter makes it clear that the miracle itself is insufficient evidence to say that it's from God or not.

But the fulfilled prophecy or the sign or the wonder or the omen or the portent are insufficient evidence of themselves to say that they come from God or not. The phenomena are inconclusive evidence.

Why? Because false prophets can do miracles. False prophets can predict things that come true. Just remember the prophets and magicians in Pharaoh's court in the time of Moses.

Moses went there and turned his staff into a snake and so did Pharaoh's magicians. Moses turned Nile to blood and so did Pharaoh's magicians. Moses brought frogs as a plague on the land and so did Pharaoh's magicians.

The miracle itself is insufficient evidence to say what it's on about and whether it's from God or not. And the New Testament likewise warns us against those who perform counterfeit miracles.

[6 : 12] That is all sorts of miracles miracles but not from God. So what's the test that we must apply here? It's not a test of if there's a miracle it must be from God nor is it the opposite extreme that if it's a miracle outside Christian context or outside the church or it doesn't bring good that can't be from God.

It's a more important test than that. Moses goes on in the second half of verse 2. If these things happen and they take place the miracles occur the healings whatever and then the prophet or the dreamer of dreams says let us follow other gods and let us serve them then you must not heed the words of those prophets or the diviners of dreams.

The test is a test of worship and theology. Which god is worshipped? That's the test. Which god is worshipped?

because these who those who perform miracles or predict the future or whatever they may indeed come true at one level there may not be any obvious difference between a Christian and a non-Christian or something from God and not from God the test is not so much the event itself the phenomena itself but the god who is being worshipped and Moses is saying reject those who even perform miracles and predict the future if they lead to a god other than the god of the old testament and the god of the old testament is a god who is known in verse 2 the idea is that the false prophets or dreamers of dreams they're leading to gods who are not known but your god he is saying to Israel is known and him you must worship it's a revealed god and that's the god to be worshipped he goes on in verse 3 to talk about knowing and loving god with all your heart and soul and the word for lord your god is yahweh your god it's the relational personal name for god as we saw last week it's a god who has established a relationship with his people that's the god who must be worshipped and not any other and that's made emphatic in verse 4 literally verse 4 stresses yahweh so it's yahweh you shall follow him alone you shall fear his commandments you shall keep his voice you shall obey him you shall serve and to him you shall hold fast or cleave the emphasis is on yahweh jehovah the name of god of the old testament it's not emphasizing what you do it's emphasizing who you do it for yahweh that god and that god alone you must worship and then in verse 5 to make another point about this god who must be worshipped it is the god who brought you out of the land of egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery it's the redeemer god who must be worshipped and no other so moses is stressing in these verses that yahweh the god who has revealed himself the god who has established a relationship with his people and the god who has redeemed his people he is the god who must be worshipped and regardless of the phenomena the supernatural the paranormal the miracles the healing the prophecies and predictions that all come true anybody can do all those sorts of things but if they lead you away from that god they must be rejected no matter what they do the test is a test of worship and theology which god is to be worshipped now that's quite an important test it's an important test because in the end experience that is the things we experience must be subjected to truth and that's a fairly radical statement to make in these postmodern times for what controls people today more often than not is what they experience rather than truth

I'll say more of that in a few minutes for us as Christians the test is sharper still because the god who's revealed himself has done so in christ the god who relates to us does so in christ and the god

who's redeemed us has done so through christ and his death on the cross so in the end for us the test is is jesus being worshipped as god or not regardless of the phenomena the predictions the prophecies the miracles the healings and whatever is jesus being worshipped as god or not and if not that person is a false prophet or dreamer of dreams but if so then is to be heeded and why is this important it's important for a number of reasons it's not every day maybe we walk down the street and encounter a miracle before our eyes but nonetheless the principle here is of great importance for christians for so often christians are confused about how to evaluate things the odd things that go on in the world firstly it's important because it's not always obvious who the false prophet is the person who is the prophet or the dreamer of dreams in this chapter is not somebody outside the church but is somebody within the body of the people of god it's somebody from within israel and in our context that would be within the christian church the issue is somebody who purports to be a christian within the body of christian people standing up and performing all sorts of miraculous things or predictions that come true there is still the test to be made just because they are within the body of god's people doesn't mean it's right the test is whether they worship jesus as god and they are leading others to do the same or not that's the test that must be applied and it's not always obvious you see because people within the body of christ we might automatically think must be christian and that may not indeed be the case there is great danger of course in personal appeal and attraction of the leaders who are charismatic in the small sea that is people who've got great personality and attract people to draw them out after them within the christian church we think of the appeal of people perhaps outside the church of david koresh leading those people to death in texas a couple of years ago and jonestown suicides about 15 years ago and so on but even within the church there are plenty of people who for their personal attraction have led many many astray we need to be careful false prophets can use christian language christian terminology call upon the name of jesus obviously but yet in the end be leading people astray because it's not clear-cut the example here of the person who performs things that takes place and then says let us go and follow other gods i think he's talking about the end product rather than the initial statement the initial statement may not be well let's go and worship another god as though the distinction is black and white chalk and cheese but rather what usually happens are these false prophets and dreamers of dreams gradually veering away gradually going astray and the end result is worshipping another god we have to be careful and discerning that where those false prophets and dreamers of dreams are heading is in the right place this is also important because falsehood is seductive and alluring and enticing falsehood often promises good things that's why it's dangerous adam and eve in the garden were enticed by the serpent

[14 : 30] because he promised good things if he promised something bad they'd have never listened to him but it's because he promised them good things enticing things that they listened and were seduced falsehood is seductive because it promises good things that's why it's important to get the right test of whether it's right or not very often miracles and supernatural events seem to promise great spiritual power something that seems good and enticing but it can also be dangerous as well a third reason why this issue is important is because in our age there is a keen and growing interest in spiritual things and in spiritual phenomena there is a growing interest in new age spirits spiritualism and mysticism paranormal events and supernatural events being attributed to spiritual causes there's great attraction in healing crusades and in the so called Toronto blessing of the last two years and so this passage is warning us that from within the church there may be false prophets and we need to apply careful tests to see where they are heading and where they are leading others it's also an important issue because our culture is an experience based culture what's important for so many people today is what they experience that's why drugs are so common that's why there's such sexual immorality because sexual experience is elevated and exalted so often that's why people are craving experiences of peace and joy spiritual zapping and spiritual power that's what people are craving and wanting is some sort of experience and if they get it they think it must be good and right experience is becoming a test stone for what is right these days and that is highly dangerous there's a great deal of Christian theology so-called

Christian or charismatic Pentecostal theology that is falling into this trap of weighing everything about its validity on the basis of the experience that it offers the Bible's point of view is that truth is what counts not experience and experience is to be interpreted by truth rather than experience validating truth another reason why this is important is because false prophets can be tests from God second half of verse 3 says you must not heed these people because the Lord your God is

testing you to know whether you indeed love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul it can be deceptive and yet be a test from God and that's why it's important God tests our loyalty to him he tested Abraham to offer Isaac he tested Job in his sufferings he tested Israel in the wilderness he tested Jesus in his own temptations for 40 days and likewise us from time to time as well the testing that God brings us is to deepen us to strengthen us to sharpen our faith and our commitment to God but the tests are not always easy either and so we need to be careful and discerning and apply the right tests to how we see what's going on in the world another dimensions added in the next paragraph verses 6 to 11 here it's not so much a false prophet or a dreamer of dreams but it's anyone within the body of the church again within the body of the people of God again and this time it's the person who is closest to you your brother your father's son your mother's son your own son or daughter the wife you embrace meaning the wife you love above not so much above any other wife but but expressing the the closest possible marriage and then for those who aren't married perhaps your most intimate friend literally the friend who is as you are in an older translation the friend of your bosom those people may well entice you and lead you astray the danger of friendship or kinship which leads people ultimately astray notice that the verse six begins if anyone secretly entices you seduction alluring it's dangerous we need to know the right tests to apply in order to see whether someone is leading us astray or not and as I say the test for us is this does it lead us to the worship of Jesus as God or not if not shun it if so embrace it how do we respond to those who lead astray how do we respond to the false prophets within the church the false dreamers of dreams who lead in the end to the worship of other gods the instruction in verse five is that those prophets and those who divine by dreams shall be put to death well how many times have you heard of somebody lately within the Christian church being put and put to death for false prophecy or divining dreams none that I can think of certainly and certainly we aren't to put such people to death it's not within our jurisdiction within the nation of

Australia to put such people to death and for many of us we recoil from doing that anyway even if it were within our jurisdiction we we don't perhaps embrace capital punishment maybe we were restricted in our thinking to the really serious things like murder mass murder or child abuse or pedophilia or something like that what happens to tolerance with an instruction like this to put such a person to death some of that thinking may actually record show wrong priorities many of us might in might consider capital punishment for horrific crimes like mass murder or child abuse but for a false prophet within the church we'd probably take a step back but you see that reflects wrong priorities because the worst sin of all is not mass murder or child abuse but is idolatry and even worse is leading others into idolatry that's why these laws are here at the beginning of the laws within the center of book of deuteronomy because idolatry is the worst sin and great measures must be taken to ensure that we don't fall into it or lead others into it or allow them to fall into it as well if all sin deserves death how much more does idolatry the worship of other gods and the leading of others into it i mentioned last week that the chapters in the center of the book of deuteronomy 12 to 26 are the laws that Moses is exhorting people to obey the first 11 chapters were general exhortations and a bit of a history recapping as we saw in sermons in september but now as we began last week in deuteronomy 12 we get to the heart of the book the laws of the book last week it was the issue of places of worship and especially avoiding places that lead to idolatry and today it's about people not places but the common thread is that these are people who lead to idolatry as last week they were the places that led there the issue is that idolatry is the worst sin and must be avoided at all costs and those who entice others to idolatry are to be treated very severely the other reason for such harsh treatment here it's capital punishment is that it is for the people of god's own protection verse 5 and so you shall purge the evil from your midst the idea is of burning out a rotten something at its core not just papering over the symptoms but purging it burning it out it's a recognition that sin is like a cancer that untreated within the body of god's people will spread it's infectious and contagious and if you read genesis 1 to 11 you see its power it not only spreads from adam and eve to their children to their children's children and to all other people but it grows and and gets stronger in its grip on humanity not only does it spread but it gets stronger that's the power of sin when it's untreated within a body of people and Moses is in effect warning Israel here that if they leave deliberate sin unchallenged and undealt with within the body of god's people then it will grow it will spread it will take its grip and not only that one person who is as at its core but all others will fall as a result so the harshness of the punishment reflects the importance and the power of sin and the need to be careful within the body of god's people to deal with it properly but having said that can we today

really condone this capital punishment that's demanded in verse 5 as i say it's not part of our jurisdiction remember here that the context is christians leading other christians astray he's not talking about pagans outside the church but christians within the church leading others to worship idols and other gods certainly the theme and the issue of the purity and the holiness of god's people is no less important today than it was then but the new testament suggests a slightly different approach the approach of excommunication that where there is a false prophet or dreamer of dreams within the church who is ultimately leading people to worship of idols or other gods that person is to be expelled from the church and to have no part in it not capital punishment but excommunication all too rarely practiced today i suspect about 15 years ago i was involved in a church in sydney where i was at university and i was on the staff of this church for a year we had a chap who was of the bahai faith come to us for some months as part of our worship and we were optimistic that this was a person who was seeking jesus and would in the end become a christian but after some time it became clear that he was not there for jesus but for the women and he was causing problems and so we confronted him and in the end he refused to hear what we said and we banned him from coming to our church again until he wanted to worship jesus christ and he didn't return and that was sad but it was the right action while i was in england over the last three years the bishop of chichester has withdrawn the license of one of his clergy on the grounds of heresy the first time this century in england in the church of england has somebody been in a sense with had their license withdrawn for heresy i can't believe that there'd be no other heretics in the church of england this century but rather pleasing to see that at last a bishop was actually taking some strong action because this was a person who did not believe in the trinity did not believe in jesus as god and was teaching others so to believe and it was right and proper that the bishop expelled him despite the huge protests from all the modern people in the society and in the letters to the editor of the papers and so on caused a huge furor but the bishop was right even if it was a rare action but who's going to excommunicate all the other heretics and false prophets in the church today who's going to excommunicate the bishop's sponges of this world sadly the practice of excommunication seems to have almost lapsed but the dangers are no less real than they were here in the old testament as well the final test in the end is whether it leads to the worship of jesus as god or not not the experience that's offered the power that's offered not the miracles being performed or the healings or whatever in the end the test is whether it leads to the worship of jesus christ or not as verse 4 says in effect jesus you shall follow him alone you shall fear jesus commandments you shall keep jesus voice you shall obey jesus you shall serve and to jesus you shall hold fast amen amen Thank you.