

When Prophets are “Wrong”

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I need to explain, from scripture, factors involved in whether things God says are coming – through a prophet or anyone else – actually come to pass, or are delayed, or cancelled, or reduced in severity. It took a lot of Bible study, thought, and prayer to summarize them. I originally wrote this with short sentences and thoughts for social media posts in mind, at God’s direction. But now I feel led to adapt it and make it available as a blog as well. Let’s examine those factors. This will also cover when God changes his mind, and what the scripture says to do when prophets are “wrong,” and whether or not the scripture says that makes them “false prophets,” as some claim.

First, one needs to recognize that prophecies have components. First there is the revelation itself, which is what a person saw in a vision or dream, or heard from God, or felt impressed of in their spirit. Even novices in hearing from God often get the revelation part right, especially if what they are prophesying is of little consequence. Those receiving strategic revelations have a harder time, because Satan’s forces will oppose them more.

The second component in hearing from God is the interpretation – determining what it means. The person who is anointed or gifted in receiving revelations may not be gifted or anointed in interpreting what they mean.

Many people receive symbolic revelations that need interpretation or nobody will know what they mean. Some revelations in the Bible were like that, like Joseph or Daniel interpreting strange symbolic revelations God gave the rulers of the nation they were in.

Some revelations will seem straightforward for someone who knows the Bible, because they use symbols or imagery found in the Bible. So a pastor may feel confident to interpret it – but he or she could still be wrong if they do not know what God intended. That is why interpreting dreams and visions and other revelations may need the help of someone anointed or gifted for the task. But even one gifted for interpretation can be wrong if they think they know what God intended and they do not, and God has not corrected them.

Even Bible scholars, commentary writers, and pastors interpreting God’s written word in the Bible can be wrong in this respect. They can assume they know what God meant the words to mean, when they do not. When one puts authority beyond their own, by intent or accidentally, on what they think is meant by what God has spoken in a revelation, or in the Bible, they can be on dangerous ground.

The third component in a prophecy or revelation is the application. That is what answers the question, “What then shall we do?” That too, involves the need to have some help from God, some anointing or gifting.

People can try to determine the application themselves but not get to what God intended. It will likely take the person, or a body of believers, or their leaders, some time to pray and hear from God to determine the application of a revelation and interpretation.

However, all of this assumes a person, or a body of believers, or their leaders, actually do pray enough to be able to hear from God in some measure for themselves. Christ said his sheep hear his voice.

If people hear Christ's voice, they should be able to recognize it through another he chooses to use. In the future, the end times, inability to hear God's voice could be very costly. We all must pray enough to develop and maintain that ability.

Almost everyone should be able to hear God's voice at what I call the impression level. God can impress upon our mind and spirit that a particular message is being endorsed by God to them personally, whether it comes from the Bible or a prophetic revelation.

Having peace is another way to test things. God confirms accepting a message from the Bible, a sermon, or a prophetic revelation, by giving us peace about accepting it as for us (in our situation), and maintaining that peace over time.

And, of course, all revelation, interpretations, and applications of revelations must be tested against the teaching in the Bible. And the Bible warns revelations can come from sources other than God, and that we must test them.

With the basic teaching of revelation, interpretation, and application behind us, let's talk about some rules and principles. The first is very simple and direct, but often missed: God changes his mind. He also does not feel obligated to warn everyone, every time, of that. Please allow me to back this up, including with scripture, as it may be difficult for many to accept.

That God changes his mind can shock people, so let's talk about why he changes his mind. When God promises things, or warns of judgment, it is based on how people are acting at the time. If people change their behavior, God often changes his mind.

Scripture is full of examples of God changing his mind. God put king after king in place with high hopes and often big promises. Seldom did the kings actually walk fully in the promises they were promised – because they started disobeying God. If you want to see examples of God changing his mind because people change their behavior, read the biblical books of First Kings, Second Kings, First Chronicles, and Second Chronicles. (Bring caffeine.)

However, there is a good side to God changing his mind. God also changes his mind when people sincerely repent and change their behavior from bad to good. Even just pleading sincerely for mercy often brought a reprieve from declarations that judgment was coming.

Sincere repentance – with changed behavior – can cause God to delay or repeal his declarations of judgment. People interceding before God, praying on others' behalf for mercy on others still unrepentant, can also cause God to, at times, repeal or delay judgment. See Ezekiel 22:30, where God seeks for someone to intercede, but, when he can find no one, he purposes to bring judgment.

However, there are times when God's patience is exhausted and even people he most respects and listens to will no longer be able to get God to hold back judgment on the wicked. (This is repeatedly mentioned in Ezekiel chapter 14).

Now, let's focus this in on what it means to people sent to deliver prophetic messages of blessing and great promises – or of warning and declarations of judgment impending very soon. This is what puts people chosen to deliver promises or warnings in tough spots.

It turns out that God does not want all his disclaimers included in scripture included in every message he sends someone to speak. If he did, people would get really tired of hearing the standard disclaimers every time a revelation or prophecy was delivered. Think of the absurdity of including standard disclaimers with every prophecy. It would be like reading aloud all the fine print written by product liability lawyers in every ad on television or radio.

It so happens that God expects us to actually read his Word, the Bible. If we do that, we don't need warning disclaimers on every prophecy. Even if someone delivering a prophecy wants to put warning disclaimers on it, God is unlikely to allow it. God clearly defines standard disclaimers in scripture in Jeremiah 18:7 and following. He says he will repent of promised judgment if people repent of sin. Then he says he will repent of promised blessing of people if they do evil.

First God says, "At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it; If that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them." Then God says, "And at what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it; If it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them."

So, even in scripture, we see prophets delivering declarations of blessings and promises, or warnings of judgment - which do not come to pass. And scripture does not call them false prophets and righteous rulers do not have them judged and stoned over it.

Let's look at some examples. The book of Jonah is a good place to start. He warned of certain judgment coming in a certain time frame and it did not happen – but we include his book as from a true prophet in scripture, and even Christ mentioned him as a true prophet. Scripture does not record that he included any standard disclaimers on his prophecy of impending destruction, but when the people repented, God did not carry out the judgment he had Jonah warn with certainty was coming.

Then there is the prophetess Huldah who promised King Josiah he would go to his grave in peace. But Josiah went out to a battle God warned he was not sending him into and died – and Huldah is not considered a false prophetess. Disobedience brought the loss of a promise.

One could also include Isaiah sent to tell King Hezekiah he is going to die. Isaiah did not even make it home before God sent him back because he changed his mind when the king pleaded and God gave him fifteen more years (2 Kings 20).

The examples could go on, but let's accept that when prophets were "wrong" because the scriptural standard disclaimers on reasons God changes his mind came into consideration, prophets were not considered false prophets or punished by righteous rulers. This is basic, but many miss this.

At this point, I will insert another case when prophets can be wrong. That is when they speak out of their flesh, as a person just expressing what they think, but because of the authority they carry from being used to also speak words from God, they get themselves in trouble.

One case of this is the prophet Nathan (2 Samuel 7) who apparently assumed God was in King David building the temple and said so. God then corrected Nathan with his will on the matter, which was for David's son to build it. God sent Nathan back to correct his mistake but God did not instruct David, the man after God's own heart, to stone him, and God did not have him removed from his role as prophet to the king. In this case, God did not punish Nathan for expressing an opinion or jumping to a conclusion that did not align with what God wanted on a matter. This can also happen when people say what they think a revelation means when God has not clearly said.

This can get deeper. People can think God is saying something they really want to believe God is saying, and say it to themselves and think it is God. I have had God tell me, "You want it bad, tell it to yourself. It happens. It's common, the problem. Be aware. Sort and sift." This can happen when you see someone you greatly care for in a situation you dearly want God to fix, like a loved one with cancer. It can also happen with personal guidance. I have seen it in college students, desiring to marry a certain person, only God did not tell the other person. People can blame God for not fulfilling what they hoped and imagined he said. So this is not just prophets, it is anybody in their personal guidance. Hopefully, nobody calls you a false prophet for wrong personal guidance, but if you try to control them with what you think you heard, they might.

Another major way prophets can be wrong is when they hear from a spirit that is not the Holy Spirit, and they might not be able to tell the difference right away. Hearing from the wrong spirit is addressed in 1 John 4:1 where it says, "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God . . ." Trying the spirits means testing who you are really hearing from – and who one prophesying is hearing from.

There are reports in the New Testament of the apostles speaking from spirits that are not the Holy Spirit. Christ corrected them, but did not ban them as false prophets or false apostles. Christ told James and John, "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of" (Luke 9:55 NKJV) when they asked if they should call down fire to judge some people. And Peter, whom many see as the leader of the apostles, in Matthew 16, got commended by Christ for God the Father having revealed great truth to him, and then got called "Satan" by Christ when he spoke under the inspiration of Satan to stop the plan of God for Christ to be slain for the sins of mankind shortly thereafter, apparently to let him know where his inspiration was coming from.

I used to train young people who walked in prophetic giftings. I did so partly by giving them books they could keep and read that would teach them essential things. I would almost always

give them a book on spiritual warfare right away. I also gave them books I would call “soul scrapers.” These were books that would tend to scrape out the inside of one’s soul, mind, and emotions. They would convict of any sin a person had failed to stop sinning, starting with offense and unforgiveness.

Why would I address sin to help people hear more reliably from God and not some other spirit? Because sin is the claim that lets the enemy of our souls, Satan and his evil spirits - demons, bother and deceive Christians. If you want to hear reliably from God, stop sinning.

I did also teach that God, by his great grace, tends to cover us from the consequences of the sins we have not yet dealt with, until he brings them to our attention. But eventually, God does address sins for our good, to set us free from demonic harassment. God does not expect us to grow up right away, but he does expect us to grow up, to mature in our walk with him, and to stop sinning on purpose. And stopping sinning is important if you want to stop being bothered by deceiving spirits trying to keep you from hearing from God accurately.

Now, I have found that, when God starts using you to speak for him in matters of strategic importance to a lot of people, the battle against the enemy can get pretty extreme to where you do not want to sin on purpose, or even accidentally. Christ spoke of Satan coming against him but not being able to find anything in him. Christ was sinless. We have not achieved that. We have to work at keeping Satan from finding anything in us, any sin, that allows him opportunity to work against us.

Ephesians six is the chapter most rely on to teach on spiritual warfare. Really though, Paul starts the teaching far earlier in the book than most realize, because he first deals with the sins that enable warfare against us. When Paul talks about all the spiritual armor we have to put on, it is really the summation on a lot of teaching earlier in the book in dealing with the sin that is the problem. The breastplate of righteousness really requires righteousness to protect us.

There are particular sins that really give us a lot of extra trouble from Satan and his demons, especially in being able to hear from God accurately and not hear from demonic spirits instead of God. The worst sins for enabling demonic deception when trying to hear from God are the sins involved in having tried to get revelation from demonic spirits, or worshiping, or revering, even fearing, demonic spirits or demonic gods, or asking their help.

Those sins require an extra step beyond asking God’s forgiveness. It requires also renouncing having ever done those things. Renouncing is the act of cancelling any invitation to demons to lead us, or ever honoring or revering or worshiping them in any way. Worshiping or asking guidance or help from demons or demonic gods is like an open invitation to those demons to affect your life from then on. You have to renounce, or revoke, the invitation your words, deeds, or emotions made to those demons or demonic gods.

Once you have accepted Christ, and repented and renounced those open invitations, you can use your authority in Christ to tell the demons to go and leave you alone and they have to obey. I have taught how to do that and seen the wonder or relief on faces when they report that it works

great. We benefit from Christ's victory over Satan and all his forces when we align ourselves with Christ, repent of our sins, and renounce any invitations to demons.

These days, the occult, the demonic, has infiltrated society all around us, especially in the media, in entertainment, even for children. Even toys now can be occult, encouraging children to invite the demonic realm to help them with divination, spells, and sorcery.

Since I addressed sins as holes in our "breastplate of righteousness," our armor in spiritual warfare, I should address another category that leaves us vulnerable – unhealed wounds. What really affects us, though, is the sins that tend to go with our unhealed wounds. When we have unhealed wounds, we tend to have anger, unforgiveness, and prejudice against anyone displaying the characteristics of whatever or whoever wounded us.

One of the biggest projects God can take on is working on our unhealed wounds. We can even have deep wounds we don't even realize we have, but God knows are there. Sometimes we realize what happened but don't realize how deeply it affects us. Sometimes we have wounds so deep and so traumatic that we don't even know they happened to us. Little kids under age eight tend to totally suppress such things and they come to conscious awareness much later in life.

So, God can have a challenge bringing us to full healing over time, as we can withstand the process. The process is not easy or instant. But God still uses people who are not fully healed. In fact, our wounds can even have great value once healed. And the wounded tend to be the people that pray more than anyone else – because they need God more. And the value of that prayer is that it brings a close relationship with God and hearing his voice better.

But understand, we will still have a battle to hear from God even if we have dealt with all of these things. The Earth is a battlefield in a war between God and Satan and his forces, mainly demons. We have to fight. If we don't, we won't fare well. We can fight through prayer and worship. We can also directly take authority over demons in Christ's name and tell them to leave. But they might sneak back around and try again, so it is not one battle but an ongoing war we are in.

As I mentioned, people in more strategic roles in this battle have more attack come against them – so they need people to pray for them. Prophetic people who deliver strategic messages need prayer support too, just like pastors and church leaders do. If prayer support is lacking for people in strategic roles, those that rely on them may suffer as they struggle to hear from God accurately, to receive revelation they share with others, be it a prophecy or a sermon.

This brings me to another way and reason prophetic people can be wrong. God lets prophetic people struggle in their personal guidance on occasion to help them be humble. I remember an internationally respected prophet confessing that he deals with that. Another widely respected prophet said that people with prophetic callings get humiliated in every area of their lives. I and people around me found that comforting because we were all experiencing it as well.

Unfortunately, the easiest way for God to assure the humility of a prophet is to let him be wrong. That is because there are hordes of people out there just waiting to pounce on anyone called a

prophet if they say anything “wrong” for any reason. Why is that? It is because some people think the Bible says that if someone claimed to be a prophet is ever “wrong” they are a “false prophet” and should be completely rejected. Unfortunately, that is not correct on a number of levels.

First, in the very passage that they try to use to say any prophet getting anything wrong is a false prophet (Deuteronomy 18), Moses tells them there is a prophet coming like him in the future whom they must listen to or they will be judged – and the apostles said that prophet is Christ.

And, if we listen to Christ, he changed what people think Moses lined out as how we are to judge prophets. Pastors love to tell their people that in the New Testament we are no longer under the law of the Old Testament and we get grace. However, many pastors and many others seem to forget we are under grace when someone claimed to be a prophet is involved. For prophets, they want to go back to the Old Testament law and judge them with what they think it says, not what Christ and the Apostles said.

Now, let’s address what people think Moses said in the passage they think says to reject someone as a “false prophet” if they are ever wrong. It actually does not say that – if properly translated.

Hang on. This is going to get technical. Ancient Hebrew was written with just consonants. They did not write the vowels/vowel marks for a long time. You had to guess which word was intended – like people do in reading the message on personalized license plates. It gets even worse. Some words, written with consonants, could have a large number of possible meanings. And they could even be used as different parts of speech. So, translators may have to use the context a lot to get to the right translation out of many options.

The passage people want to use to condemn prophets if they are ever wrong is in Deuteronomy 18 and it is a record of Moses speaking. Deuteronomy means “Second law.” It is basically a repetition of what people had already been taught. Well, in Deuteronomy 13, Moses had addressed the same subject and basically said, if prophets are wrong, AND they lead the people after other gods, then they are false prophets. And Deuteronomy 18, only five chapters away and probably only a few minutes of public speaking away from chapter 13, also mentions prophets leading the people after false gods – it just does it a few more verses away.

But chapters and verses were not included in the Bible when it was written. They were added many years down the line to make it easier to refer to a passage. And where the breaks were put was not divinely inspired. Sometimes they cause trouble.

Context is important, very important, to accurately translate and interpret scripture. And context includes the sentence, the paragraph, the chapter (not originally there), the discourse originally spoken as a unit, and all of scripture (and more).

I have already pointed out plenty of examples where people regarded as true prophets in scripture were technically “wrong” for valid reasons and nobody in scripture judged them to be “false prophets.” And I have already noted that Christ and the Apostles in scripture did not teach us to judge prophets the way many today think Deuteronomy 18 told them to. So, the context of:

the full passage, Moses' discourse on the same topic a few chapters away, the examples of scripture in the Old Testament, and the teaching and examples of scripture in the New Testament do not support the way Deuteronomy 18 is translated in many versions.

How did I get to this realization? I asked God a lot of questions, for years, and he finally answered in detail about Deuteronomy 18 versus chapter 13, which teaches on the same topic. God said, about both passages (Deuteronomy 13 and 18), "Teaching rebellion against the Lord – going after other gods. It's in both places – just ignored by translators" [in chapter 18].

I am not a Hebrew scholar but I used references that look at the Hebrew and the definitions and parts of speech, etc. And I tested what I heard against the evidence. The Hebrew is very ambiguous and vague and context is very important in this. It makes sense to use the broader context of the passage, and the context of the passage a few chapters away addressing the same subject, and the examples of how prophets were judged in the rest of scripture. And it makes sense doctrinally to consider that Moses himself, in that passage, spoke of a prophet like him coming that should be listened to and the Apostles said Christ was that prophet – and Christ did not advocate judging prophets by if they are ever "wrong."

So, there are at least two very valid doctrinally correct reasons for prophets not to be judged as "false prophets" if they are ever wrong. The first reason is that, even if one contends that Deuteronomy 18 says that if a prophet is ever wrong they are a false prophet, Christ changed how prophets are to be judged, and Moses basically said in Deuteronomy 18 that he would have authority to do that. The second reason is that the passage used in the Old Testament is likely translated wrongly, having ignored the context of the statements a few verses down, and a few chapters away, and the context of scriptural accounts of prophets not judged that way as a whole.

Christ said that false prophets are to be identified by their "fruit" (as in fruits of the Spirit – their character/behavior) and if inside they have the character of "ravenous wolves." (See Matthew 7:15-20.) That is Christ's New Testament rule for judging prophets, not what some think Deuteronomy 18 taught.

The Apostle Paul says to judge a prophetic word but does not say to judge the prophet as a false prophet if their word is rejected as wrong. And, in context, Paul appears to be saying it is the other prophets who should judge the prophecy (1 Corinthians 14:29).

And Christ had a relevant warning about judging harshly and improperly bringing judgment on the one doing the judging - in the same passage where he told how to judge false prophets. (See Matthew 7:1-5).

But I am not a Hebrew scholar – so let's consider some that are. The translators of the respected new translation, the English Standard Version (ESV), include translation notes when there is another valid translation other than the one they selected. The translation note on the key verse in Deuteronomy 18 that causes many to condemn prophets as false prophets if they are ever wrong, acknowledges that the correct translation may be different, and different in a way that aligns with Deuteronomy 13.

The note in question allows that the meaning could be: if the prophet is wrong, AND they lead people after other gods (teach rebellion against the Lord), THEN they are false prophets. This other valid translation they include in the note would put the passage in line with Deuteronomy 13 and the examples we see in the rest of scripture, and not put it at odds with the eventual teaching of Christ on the matter of judging prophets.

I had not intended to mention it, but now feel compelled by God to include this: The current translation of Deuteronomy is “political.” Prophets are sent by God to challenge and correct leaders – and leaders don’t like it. So, when prophets can be dismissed more easily by wrong translation of one murky passage, leaders can use their power and influence to force scholars to translate using the translation option that benefits leaders by making it easier to reject and punish prophets.

This likely goes all the way back to early translations, where the translators converted the female name of an apostle to a male name, attacking support for women in ministry. English translations seem afflicted with this similar attack on prophets.

One could certainly write a book on all of these issues on why prophets can be “wrong” and what the scripture really says about how to handle it when they are. I hope this condensed mini-sermon on the matter helps.

To summarize: Prophets can be wrong for various reasons, including God changing his mind, because people change their behavior. But the scripture does not condemn Old Testament prophets as false prophets for being wrong unless they also lead people after other gods.

In the New Testament, Christ revised the rules (as Moses indicated he could) to identify false prophets by their fruits, their character, and warned of their inward nature being like ravenous wolves. Honest mistakes did not bring condemnation as a “false prophet.”