

CHAPTER 2

A Prophetic People

One of the reasons that John's first task was to measure the altar where the worshipers were gathered was because true prayer is very much like prophecy. In fact, when we pray the prayers that God gives us, we are actually prophesying back to God. When Ezekiel found himself in the Valley of Dry Bones, he did not just prophesy to the bones, he prophesied to the Spirit. There is a sense in which when we pray we are speaking God's word back to Him.

Abraham the Prophet

In fact, the first time the word "prophet" is used in Scripture, it is to describe the ministry of Abraham. That should not surprise us because many things begin with Abraham. It

is at the time when Abimelech has taken Abraham's wife and God has smitten the whole of Abimelech's household with barrenness. God says, "*Now return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you*" (Gen. 20:7). So his prophetic ministry was functioning in his prayers. Prayer and prophecy are therefore related. That is why Paul teaches us in Corinthians that when a woman prays or prophesies she does so with her head covered (and a man with his head uncovered). She is ministering as a priest in the purposes of God. Praying and prophesying are sides of the same coin. When I prophesy, I come from the presence of God to you to bring you His word. When I pray, I go into the presence of God from you to take your burdens to Him. To find God recommissioning John into his prophetic ministry and seeing his first task as separating out those who pray at the altar should not surprise us at all. Our first responsibility is to be in the presence of God. In fact, if we do not spend time in the presence of God, we will never hear what God wants to say to us.

Jeremiah was the true prophet of God, but the nation was filled with many false prophets. God said of them that "if they had stood in my council, they would have proclaimed my words" (see Jer. 23:22). What made them false prophets was that they prophesied out of their imagination, and they had not spent time in the presence of God. The mere fact that the incense altar is before the throne actually demonstrates to us where our priority position has to be. We are a people who know what it is to stand before the throne. We bring our prayer, we bring our praise, and we bring our worship, but we also tune our ear to hear what God has to say,

and we take the word of God back into our world and our society to mold it accordingly.

Moses the Prophet

It has always been God's desire to fulfill his purpose through a prophetic people. The Bible tells us that when God brought Israel out of Egypt it was by a prophet that he delivered him and by a prophet that he kept him (see Hos. 12:13). Moses the great prophet was God's deliverer. Moses was under tremendous pressure to maintain the equilibrium of the people and motivate them on their pilgrimage. He came to God and he said, "God, it is too much for me. I cannot do it on my own." God said, "Come into the tent of meeting and bring 70 elders with you. I will come down in the cloud and speak to you and I will take the Spirit who is on you and I will put him on them" (see Num. 11:10-17).

One of the things about the prophetic spirit and one of the reasons why we need to recognize and receive a prophet in the name of a prophet is because he carries an anointing that is highly contagious. If you receive him in the right way, his anointing will touch you. So God is going to take the Spirit who is on Moses and puts him on the elders. Moses called the 70 elders. Sixty-eight of them arrived in time for the meeting. This shows us that after thousands of years nothing has changed! But here is what God does. God puts the Spirit not only on the 68 elders in the tent but on the two who are still in the camp.

God demonstrates to us that prophecy is not just for the sanctuary, it is for the street. It is not just for the meeting place, it is for the marketplace. God wants his prophetic word

out in the world. But someone was offended that two elders were exercising spiritual functions outside of the sanctuary and ran and reported it. Moses' response was, "*Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put His Spirit on them!*" (Num. 11:29). That was the desire of Moses. Not just a wishful thought, not just a throwaway line. He was in the presence of God. He was in the cloud. The glory of God was surrounding him, and he is declaring the very heart of God. God wants a prophetic people.

Jesus the Prophet

What Moses desired, Joel centuries later declared had come to pass: in the last days "*I will pour out My Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy*" (Joel 2:28). God is going to have a prophetic community, and what Moses desired and Joel declared, the Day of Pentecost delivered. The church was born as a community of prophets: "*This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 'In the last days, God says, I will pour out My Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams'*" (Acts 2:16-17). God has always wanted a prophetic people. The clue to this is that God's ultimate purpose is for us to be like Jesus. So what is Jesus like? If we are going to be like Him, it would be nice to know what He is like.

Well, there are many descriptions. We have seen some dramatic and awesome descriptions of Jesus in the Book of Revelation, and there are many titles of Jesus throughout the Scriptures. In fact, I have got a very thick book that tries to catalog all the names and the titles of Jesus, and given time you could probably think of many names that would stir or

comfort us. But you probably would not come up with this one: *prophet*. It does not carry the same emotion, and yet that is what Jesus was. Moses said, “*The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me*” (Deut. 18:15). So if Jesus is the prophet, it follows that if we are to be like Jesus, then we are to be a prophetic people. We belong to a prophetic redeemer.

Elijah the Prophet

Not only was Moses an outstanding prophet and Jesus a prophet like Moses, but the Scripture speaks to us of a more mysterious man who is used as a prophetic paradigm—Elijah. Most prophets in Scripture are introduced as descendents of at least a couple of generations to establish their pedigree. Elijah, however, just turns up. He seems to come from nowhere. In fact, he is described only as “the Tishbite,” and nobody really knows where that is or what it means. It means something like “from the settlers among the settlers or among the people who live somewhere,” but it is hard for them the biblical writers to describe exactly what it means. But he is a prophet of God, and the Bible has an interesting way of joining these two men, Moses and Elijah, together. In fact, the last chapter of the Old Testament, before the page closes and 400 years of prophetic silence ensue, God speaks and makes a promise.

He says two things. First of all, “*Remember the law of My servant Moses,*” and then, “*I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes*” (Mal. 4:4-5). These two men are joined together in a sense of expectation. What is more, the sense of expectation is set in the new day that is going to break out in the world. For this chapter begins like this: “*For you who revere My name, the sun of righteousness*

will rise with healing in its wings" (Mal. 4:2). Malachi is saying, "There is a new day coming. There is a new sunrise coming, and healing is in its wings, and in that day you will remember my servant Moses, and I will send you Elijah the prophet." So unsurprisingly, when Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up onto the mountain and He prays, His face starts shining like the sun, and His clothes become brilliant white, and there appear with him on the mountain in the glory of his sunshiny face Moses and Elijah (see Matt. 17:1-3). They have turned up in a foretaste of the new day that is about to break.

The Two Witnesses

Revelation chapters 10 and 11 are of one piece. Chapter 10 is the commissioning of a new prophetic thrust, and chapter 11 is the recording of how that prophetic ministry works out. I am sure you are familiar with the two witnesses of whom God speaks. And as you look at these two witnesses, and as you take note of the miracles they perform, you discover that they are identical to the miracles that Moses and Elijah performed. Who the witnesses are we will try to discover, but whoever they are, we already see that their work is characterized by the works of Moses and Elijah. They have been commissioned in John's commissioning by an angel who has a sunshiny face. God's new day has arrived, and God's new day is going to be hallmarked by prophetic anointing and by prophetic ministry.

God has always wanted and always planned for a prophetic people, and the coming of Jesus into the world was the means of achieving it. Down through history he has had prophets. God is not looking for superstars. He is not looking for great platform fame. God is looking for a prophetic people: "*Would*

that all the Lord's people were prophets and that He would put His Spirit on them!"

God declares, "*I will give power to My two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days*" (Rev. 11:3). In the next three chapters, we are going to find these strange numbers repeated: 42 months; 1,260 days; and "time, times and half a time." You do not need to make too much of that. It is the period in which Elijah shut the heavens so that there would be no rain. It is the length of time that Jesus took to fulfill his earthly ministry. So, in a sense, it represents to us the whole church age, the whole age in which the church is ministering in the name of Jesus, in which we are supposed to demonstrate our power and authority, and in which we are supposed to move in signs and wonders—to reproduce, if you like, the ministry of Elijah in our world.

When Jesus was with the disciples on the mountain, the disciples asked him, "Why do the teachers of the Law say that Elijah must come first?" The teachers of the Law taught that, because that is what the Bible says, as we have already noted: "*I will send you the prophet Elijah*" (Mal. 4:5). Then Jesus replied to his disciples: "*To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things.*" But he also told them that "*Elijah has already come,*" and they realized he was referring to John the Baptist (see Matt. 17:9-13).

So we have this enigma, and the enigma of Elijah is the same as the enigma we have with the Kingdom. The Kingdom has come, the Kingdom is coming, and the Kingdom will come. It is not here in fullness, but we have experienced it already. We have tasted the power of the age to come. We

are citizens of the Kingdom although the Kingdom is not yet here in all its fullness; that is why we still pray, "Your Kingdom come." But every time there is a sign, a wonder, or a miracle, the Kingdom has advanced. For Jesus said, "*If I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the Kingdom of God has come to you*" (Luke 11:20). That is why we go and preach the Kingdom. We do not preach the Church. We preach the Kingdom. When you preach the Kingdom, Jesus builds the church. His job is to build the Church, and here is a little secret: He is better at it than we are! So, we bring in the Kingdom. Jesus said "*From the days of John the Baptist until now, the Kingdom of Heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it*" (Matt. 11:12). This is what you do: you reach into your tomorrow and you drag it into your today.

Now John, of course, is described as someone who will go before the Lord in the power and spirit of Elijah. The interesting thing about Moses and Elijah is this. They have great similarities. Both of them stood against powerful and hostile kings; they both represented God in moments of intense darkness. Moses stood before Pharaoh when God's people in Egypt were enslaved under political dominion; Elijah stood before Ahab when God's people in Israel were enslaved by spiritual deception and held in demonic darkness. Both had to withstand principalities and powers. Moses had to tackle the magicians of Egypt; Elijah had to tackle the priests of Baal. There was conflict going on; there was warfare. Elijah and Moses represent the two great miracle ages of Israel's history.

When Elisha asked Elijah for a double portion, he was asking to be the eldest son who has the responsibility to carry

on the work of the father. There were always miracles among God's people, but these two periods were generational miracle ages. The nation of Israel, when it came out of Egypt, saw God's hand work miracles, signs, and wonders. But when the Israelites came out of Egypt and into the wilderness, they experienced miracles every day for 40 years. It is fantastic to read the accounts. It is exciting. It is also very sobering that although they saw miracles every day for 40 years, they all died in the wilderness, in unbelief. Elijah and Elisha's ministry was the other great miracle age—signs and wonders, miracles of provision, miracles of healing, miracles of resurrection, all kinds of miracles happening on every hand. These two great men represented the dynamic of God, the anointing of God, let loose in their world. They were catalysts of God's power.

Both of them, although not without difficulty, convinced the majority; both of them were able to influence their society. Moses, even with a grumbling and rebellious people, was able to bring them out of Egypt and take them through the wilderness. Elijah was able to turn the hearts of the people back to God. Having seen them limping between two opinions, he focused their hearts and turned them back to the Lord. A whole nation was affected by the ministry of these two men.

Both of them overcame their own weaknesses. One of the things I like about the Scriptures is that God shows us that he uses very real and very ordinary people. Moses, who claimed he could not speak, who said it was too hard, too difficult, too heavy, overcame his own weakness and found his strength in God. Elijah, who was ready to give up, who wanted to lay it all down, who wanted just to lie down and die, overcomes his own weakness, his own burnout, and is ready, in his second spiritual

breath, to pursue the purposes of God. If we are going to be God's prophetic people, we are going to have to overcome our own weaknesses. You do not get disqualified for being weak. You do not get disqualified for having weaknesses. But you do disqualify yourself if you do not overcome them.

Both of them were concerned not with their own ministry, but with God's glory. In the case of Moses, God said, "I have had it with this people. I am wiping them out." Moses interceded, "O God, do not do that, your glory is at stake here. If you do that, the other nations will say, 'Ha! He brought them out but he could not bring them in.'" (see Num. 14:11-25). He says, "God, it is your glory at stake." He was concerned for God's glory. Elijah stands before God and says, "*I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty*" (1 Kings 19:10). These were people who were sold out for the purposes of God. It is that kind of people who are going to change the world. It is that kind of people who are going to bring in the Kingdom. It is that kind of people whom Jesus is seeking to produce among the churches to whom he is writing in the Book of Revelation. He wants them to understand that it does not matter how weak they are, or how much they have disqualified themselves. He is saying to them, "I can use you. You can be an overcomer. You can be part of the prophetic company that will change the world."

Because we are shown two witnesses here, and because their miracles are so akin to the miracles of Moses and Elijah, many commentators tell us that these two are Moses and Elijah come back again. Others say it is Enoch and Elijah because they are the two men who did not die; they point out that these witnesses are going to be killed, and men have to die once, so it must be those two. I think there is a far simpler and less

complex answer to this. God says, "My two witnesses." That is a technical term as far as Scripture is concerned: by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word is established. You can trace that truth from the law of Moses right up to the Book of Revelation (see Deut. 19:15). Jesus himself said, "*In your own Law it is written that the testimony of two men is valid*" (John 8:17). Paul writes to the Corinthians, "*This will be my third visit to you. Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses*" (2 Cor. 13:1). Two or three is the number of confirmed witness. It is the number of confirmed truth: "*Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses*" (1 Tim. 5:19). It is a legal and spiritual requirement with God. So God is not necessarily looking for two individuals, but he is looking for two confessions. He is looking for two words that confirm everything he is doing. He is looking for a corporate witness.

Olive Trees

Now the image here is an interesting and composite one. The witnesses are two olive trees, and they are two lamp stands. Now we have already met lamp stands, and remember the Bible is its own best commentary. Where did we meet lamp stands? It was way back in chapter 1: the seven lamp stands are the seven churches. So lamp stands are churches. And just as seven was the completeness of the church at worship, two is the completeness of the church in its witness, the basic requirement of a confirmed truth. So, we are not seeing individuals, we are seeing the church again in a different function and a different ministry. It is not standing around the throne worshipping; it is out in the world witnessing. That is

This is a picture of the Church, the worldwide universal Church of Jesus Christ pursuing its prophetic ministry. They are going to prophesy for 1,260 days while the temple is being trampled for 42 months. It is the same period of course, except months are governed by the moon, which is responsible for the night, and days are governed by the sun, which is responsible for the light (see Gen. 1:16). And things go on simultaneously in our world—for some it is in the day, and for some it is in the night. Everything that happens for us is in the day.

If you noticed in these next three chapters, when John moves from days to months, the days always are to do with God's redeemed people, and the nights are always to do with periods of darkness. It is the same period of time, but it is experienced differently by different people. It is like Israel in Egypt—when God brought great darkness on the land, the sun still shone in Goshen. While our world is in darkness, we are in the light. And we are prophesying, we are speaking God's Word of light into our darkened world.

The Beast from the Abyss

But the world does not like it, and suddenly we are introduced to a character we did not know was coming. When we sat down before this drama began to unfold, took our seats to watch the stage, occupied our important front row seats, and, before the curtain went up and the cast assembled on stage, read down through the list of players, this character was not there. But now abruptly he has turned up—and he is called “the beast from the abyss.” Where did he come from? We get no introduction, no explanation. It simply states, “*Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the*

Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them” (Rev. 11:7). There are two very important things to notice here. He could not touch them until they had finished their testimony. Whoever he is, he cannot touch you until you have finished all the ministry that Jesus has entrusted to you. You are invulnerable until you have finished. That is why it is a good idea always to ask Jesus for more to do! When the two witnesses finished their work, he attacked, overcame, and killed them.

We will discover that chapter 13 actually runs parallel to this, and it is in chapter 13 that we get the clue to who this beast is. But I want you to notice that although he attacks, overpowers, and kills them, he has no authority over them. We have looked and seen that when the plagues and horrors are released on our world, they do not come our way, and yet it would be impossible for us to live in a world that was suffering those things and not be affected by them. Some of the spillover will touch us. If a plague comes, we could be infected. I am just using human expressions now. If economic crisis hits a nation, we would be affected. We could not go down to the mortgage society and say, “Excuse me. This does not apply to me. I am a believer. I belong to Jesus.” They would not be impressed.

We will be affected by things that touch the world. But we will overcome. We are troubled by the plague, but we believe in a God who heals. We are affected by an economic crisis, but we believe in a God who supplies all our needs. We will have miraculous moments when persecution comes, although we will be touched, and some may die. And I am not looking only at some future time, because persecution is in our world now. There are brothers and sisters of ours today

who are laying down their lives for Jesus. There are martyrs being added to that number under the altar daily. In fact, there are more people dying for Jesus now than there probably have been in the history of the church. So when I say "when persecution comes," I am not saying "when this book gets fulfilled, when the West starts seeing the fulfillment of all this book speaks of," because what this book has spoken of is happening already. We could go to nations where the beast is exercising his power. Some will die, inevitably, but we are just walking the path of Jesus. "*For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain*" (Phil. 1:21).

Paul had a dilemma. It is the only dilemma in the whole of Scripture that I find Paul facing. He did not know what to do—whether to die and be with the Lord or to stay and help his fellow Christians (see Phil. 1:21-26). He said that actually to go and be with the Lord would be far better, but they still needed him, so he would stay. A nice dilemma to have. But the beast from the abyss kills the witnesses, and their bodies lie in the street for three and a half days. John describes the location of their martyrdom as the great city—always a description of Babylon in Revelation, and of Sodom, Egypt, and Jerusalem, the place where their Lord was crucified and which, Jesus said, was the place of every prophetic murder (see Luke 13:33).

These four locations are used to communicate spiritual truths. The witnesses have resisted the seductive deceptions of Babylon. They were not defiled by the sexual deviance of Sodom, nor did they give way to the slavish despair of Egypt, and grace has saved them from the subjecting demands of Jerusalem's religious legalism. John uses the three and a half days as a device because it matches the three and half years,

the 42 months and the 1,260 days, and it is also closely related to the time that Jesus was in the tomb. He uses it as a device to explain to us that there is persecution of God's people all the way down through the church age, but just as their Lord was three days in the tomb and rose again, our confidence is that though they slay us yet we will live! They are raised after three and a half days, and they go up to Heaven in a cloud just as their Lord ascended.

We are going to see this repeated in chapter 12. It is the same picture from a different perspective. It says this: "*After the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet*" (Rev. 11:3). Do you know that is almost identical to the way the resurrection of the dead bones in Ezekiel is recorded? "*Breath entered them,*" says Ezekiel; "*they came to life and stood up on their feet.*" And he adds this: "*a vast army*" (Ezek. 37:10). Every time they kill a servant of God, a vast army arises in his place. The old church fathers used to say, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." It was as if every drop that was shed was the fertilizer that brought forth new life. Do you remember how Jesus described his own death? He says, "*I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds*" (John 12:24).

One death, multitudes of life. Look at the harvest that has come from the laying down of the life of the Lord Jesus, and look at the harvest in many parts of our world where the martyred church is growing in remarkable ways. O you foolish devil! O you crazy demons! Don't you know that every time you martyr the servants of God, God causes a multitude to rise? Don't you know?

We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory (1 Corinthians 2:6-8).

If satan had understood the wisdom of God! If the rulers and the principalities had understood the wisdom of God! Satan does not know everything. Satan only reacts against what God initiates. He is not all-knowing.

Some Christians in this age have the misconception that there is a battle going on between equal powers. In fact, the way some of them preach and teach and live, you would think satan is more powerful. They certainly think a curse has greater power than the blessing of God. There are people walking around believing they have curse on them. Listen! You have been blessed in Jesus, and if you are blessed you cannot be cursed. They brought on old Balaam and asked him to curse God's people and he replied, "*How can I curse those whom God has not cursed?*" (Num. 23:8). There is no divination against Jacob. There is no curse on you. You live in the blessing of God.

Satan does not know it all. He is not all-powerful. He is not everywhere, either. If satan is hounding you, it means he is leaving me alone, because he cannot be on to both of us at the same time. If they had understood, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. Well, of course, they would have because there is enmity in their hearts. They cannot do

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anything else about it. Satan encountered one Jesus, and all his animosity focused on that one Jesus. All his dark machinations were spent against that one Jesus. He saw that one Jesus nailed to a cross. He watched that one Jesus die. He saw that one Jesus buried, and he saw to his horror a multitude of Jesus rising from the dead, witnesses raised up into life because God is with them and God is for them. And God gains a great victory through them, for it tells us that only 7,000 people perished in the earthquake that ensued.

Now that is interesting because when Elijah was before God, there were only 7,000 who were true to the Lord, and the whole nation was in apostasy. Now we discover there are only 7,000 who perish—but the vast majority give glory to God. The ministry of the prophetic witness has been effective, and multitudes have been saved. That is God's will and purpose for us.

The Book of Revelation not only unveils Christ, it also unveils the devil. It shows us what he really is. It shows us his devices. The apostle Paul could say to the church that they were not ignorant of Satan's devices (see 2 Cor. 2:11). Unfortunately we could probably not say that about the church today.

We Are in a Battle

We are living in the days when Paul says that there will be those who "follow deceptive spirits, and things taught by demons" (1 Tim. 4:1). Although we know that Christ is triumphant, that all things are under his feet, and that he has crushed the serpent's head, there is still satanic and demonic activity going on in our world. I say that not to alarm us, but just to make us