

Question: What is a prophet?

Answer: A prophet is the guy or gal who is always ruffling feathers. They are the messengers of God called to challenge us, asking to change our ways, telling us what we are doing wrong, and informing us of what will happen if we continue on our misguided path. The prophet is never self proclaimed as such. Rather, he is chosen by God to do God's will and reveal the truth that seems to have been lost. The prophet is the one who cannot keep his mouth shut when things seem out of place. He's like the father figure whose strictness we cannot always understand even though the reasons for it are explained over and over again to us. Not only does he challenge the common public, but he challenges the authorities, oftentimes the king himself. The prophets are a genre of the Old Testament. They were people like Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, Daniel, Zechariah, Ezekiel, Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Haggai, Moses, and Malachi. Each one of these men had specific social situations that they faced bravely as God's chosen instrument, defending against unrighteousness, impiety, insincerity, and injustice.

Moses, found in the book of Exodus, is called unwillingly and unsuspectingly to free God's people from captivity in Egypt. When God calls Moses, Moses speaks frankly with his Lord wondering why he has been chosen for such an impossible task, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (Exodus 3:11) We know through our own experiences that the call from God is not easy. Moses has been asked to go to Egypt, the greatest nation on earth, and free his captive brothers and sisters. Even though all things are possible with God, Moses undoubtedly could not have understood or comprehended how God would work through him in the eventual freeing of the Israelites. Even when God shows Moses the power he has bestowed upon him to free his people, he is slow to accept the role God has assigned for him. Moses' humanity shines through, especially when he realizes that he must go and converse with the enemy Pharaoh, "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." (Exodus 4:10) God calls the prophet, whether they are ready or not to fill the shoes he feels they must wear as his messenger. Even after the people were freed from the bonds of Pharaoh's servitude, Moses' prophetic responsibilities did not cease. In fact, he was just as hard on his beloved people Israel as on Pharaoh himself, especially when they ignored him and created their own God. Moses was not the voice of sympathy for their ignorance, rather the voice of God's wrath, "As soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. You have sinned a great sin." While wrathful, Moses shows how much he cares for the people Israel, willing even to give his own life for them, "But now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." (Exodus 32:19,30)

The prophet's job is to bring a people who have become disconnected with God back into communion with him. Daniel, a visionary, foretells the coming destruction of Israel because of their sins against God. He is quick to admit the faults of Israel, "we have disobeyed his voice" yet, asks if God can forgive, "we pray, turn away from your city Jerusalem, your holy mountain; because of our sins and the iniquities of our ancestors." (Daniel 9:15) Not always are the prayers of the prophet answered, thus it seems Daniel has not only fallen out of favor with God, but with the people he is petitioning for as well. As Daniel knows, hopeful prayers sometimes come with distressing answers. Praying the city will not be destroyed, he receives an answer from God's angel, "Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war." (Daniel 9:26)

Becoming a prophet oftentimes calls one to go beyond the limits of the human condition unexpectedly. Jeremiah is called by God in a unique way, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." (Jeremiah 1:5) Into Jeremiah God has placed his words and appointed him over nations to destroy and overthrow, so that God can then rebuild and plant. (Jeremiah 1:10) Jeremiah is coined by Abraham Heschel as the prophet of wrath and in fact is living in a time of wrath (*The Prophets*, 134). The people he is ministering to have brought upon them God's anger (*The Prophets*, 134). Yet, Jeremiah's warning to the people has not come without its own baggage. He confesses that, "I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me." (Jeremiah 20:7) Being a prophet clearly does not mean instant glory. Jeremiah realizes this, and continues to carry on God's plan for him, "O LORD of hosts, you test the righteous, you see the heart and the mind; let me see your retribution upon them, for to you I have committed my cause. (Jeremiah 20:12) Not only is the calling that God has given Jeremiah a difficult one, but the bitter news he must bestow upon Israel is equally maligned and macabre. The people wonder if Jeremiah can foretell good news regarding the threat of the great enemy, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Instead, Jeremiah foretells the Israelites impending doom and that God himself has turned against them, "I myself will fight against you with outstretched hand and mighty arm, in anger, in fury, and in great wrath." (Jeremiah 21:5-6) As messenger of God, the prophet's job is not to do their will rather; it is to do the will of God. God's will oftentimes comes with a price tag. Even though it is a difficult task, the prophet submits to bring God's people back in line with God's will. Truly the prophet's cause is one we can all live by today: faithfulness, even when it is almost too difficult to bear.