

Dangers of Being Led Astray

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[0 : 00] Please be seated. I might like to open again the Bibles in the pews to page 149 to the passage from Deuteronomy 13.

A few weeks ago my late father's wife was talking to me on the phone and she said that she had a dream and she was convinced that something significant would happen to me at the end of October or early November and was wondering what was going to happen.

And I said, well, it's news to me. And I've wondered, what if something does happen at the end of October or early November? Does she really have this sort of psychic expectation or prediction that she sort of thinks that she has?

And if it does happen, then what does that mean about what sort of other things she might say to me in years to come? A few years ago somebody had a vision of Mary, the mother of Jesus, in a place called Medjugorje in, I think, the former Yugoslavia.

Is it a vision of Mary? If it is, what do we make of that? Does it matter? Is it important? There's a woman who claims that the late Pope healed her from Parkinson's disease.

[1 : 25] This is one of the main criterion by which the late Pope is being fast-tracked to sainthood, apparently. If he did indeed heal her from Parkinson's, and he may well have done, what do we make of that?

Should we all convert to Roman Catholicism and revere or something the late Pope as a saint? Somebody gets healed perhaps in a Pentecostal or evangelistic rally where they claim that they've got the powers of healing and somebody might up the front say, now there's somebody here who's got a bad back or a broken leg or this, that or the other.

Come forward and we'll lay hands and that person's healed. What do we make of that if those claims from time to time we hear? Does it in some way validate, authenticate or give authority to that healer, that minister, that preacher of God's word?

Should we all be going after those sorts of people because of the powers that they may have to heal? After all, healing's a good thing. It's something that the Bible teaches us God is able to do and Jesus, of course, demonstrated many times.

Or what happens if somebody predicts the future? Somebody is a psychic and claims they can speak with the dead. Somebody is able to say things to you about things that you've never told anybody else and you know that they're true.

[2 : 42] How do we judge that sort of thing? How do we validate those sorts of claims? If somebody heals or performs a miracle or predicts something that comes true or has a dream and thinks they have psychic powers?

Are they flukes or not? The same sort of thing could happen completely outside the church, of course, as well. As, for example, my late father's wife or happened to notice your horoscope one day.

I'm sure and hope you don't read them at all. But you suddenly realise, well, that's true. That's exactly what's happened today. Does it then mean that you think that you need to read your horoscope every day to find out what's going to happen?

Does it somehow give authentication, truth or power or influence to what you've read or the writer of what you've read? See, our world is full of claims and counterclaims regarding truth and spiritual power and experience.

And at one level, at one extreme, some people are tempted to be gullible, to say, well, that must have happened, that did happen. Therefore, that person, that preacher, that speaker, that writer, that dreamer, that prophet is somebody we should listen to.

[3 : 48] Clearly, they've got a stamp of God about them. On the other end, of course, there are plenty of us who are tempted to be completely gullible and say, they can't have been healed. That woman's putting it on. It's a fake story.

It never happened. Or it's just a fluke. What's truth? Whom should we heed? How do we test the varying claims around, whether they're inside the sort of umbrella of Christian faith or completely outside?

Does some sort of odd, paranormal, supernatural experience, miracle, healing, whatever, does it somehow lay claim rightly to spiritual power and authority?

How do we test those things, those claims? Well, the Bible's test is, in a sense, straightforward, but not quite as simple as we might think.

We may be tempted to think if there is a miracle, if there is a great healing, then God must be behind it. It's not quite so simple. We may think that since the future's in God's hands, if somebody, for example, my late father's wife, yet to be proven in my experience, late October, early November, says something that's true, because God knows the future, does somehow she have some word from God?

[5 : 05] Although she doesn't profess to be a Christian. Well, not so, necessarily. The book of Deuteronomy is a very old book. It was written about 1400 BC.

It's the words of God to the ancient people of God, Israel, through the prophet Moses, their leader. At the time of Deuteronomy, the people of Israel had come out from slavery in Egypt, through the plagues, and for 40 years had been in the wilderness, and now we're on the edge of the promised land.

And at the end of the book of Deuteronomy, Moses dies, and the leadership is transferred to Joshua, his successor. And in the next part of the Bible, book of Joshua, the people of Israel cross into the promised land over the river Jordan.

1400 BC. And in the center point of the book of Deuteronomy, from chapters 12 to 26, lie a whole series and sequence of laws relating to all sorts of aspects of life.

And in Deuteronomy 13, we have three situations of some form of miracle healing or fulfillment of dream or prophecy that confront the people of Israel.

[6 : 16] And this chapter details to them how they are to respond to those events. Now, the issue here is one that is critical, not only for ancient Israel, but for us as well.

As the illustrations I've given suggest, we are confronted by all sorts of claims of spiritual authority and power. How do we assess them? For ancient Israel, it was no less important.

They're about to enter a pagan land full of idolatry, the worship of all sorts of different gods, and all sorts of spiritual claims would rebound around the land.

How they are to respond gives us guidance about how we are to respond. The situations detailed in this chapter, the three of them, are hypothetical. The chapter begins if.

If prophets or those who divine by dreams appear among you and promise you omens or portents, and the omens or the portents declared by them take place.

[7 : 20] That's the circumstance. That is, not only are there prophets or speakers of the future or dreamers, but the things that they prophesy or predict actually come true.

That's the circumstance that's being suggested here at the beginning of chapter 13. What is the test?

The miracle itself is insufficient evidence to say this is God. The fulfilled prophecy or prediction is insufficient evidence by itself to say that this is from God.

The phenomena that are described in the circumstances are inconclusive by themselves about whether they are from God or not. You see, experience is at best ambiguous.

It's how we discern, critique or interpret that experience that matters. Now, why is this important? It's important because false prophets sometimes perform miracles or predict things that come true.

[8 : 26] They're not always of God. And for ancient Israel here in this book, they ought to have known that clearly. Because 40 years before in Egypt, just before they left Egypt through the Red Sea, Moses performed a whole sequence of miracles and plagues against Pharaoh and Egypt.

But the first two of them, and one preceding that sequence, the magicians of Pharaoh were able to replicate. They could also turn water to blood. They brought on frogs like Moses did.

And earlier than that, they turned a staff into a snake. That is, false prophets, pagan magicians, in this case in the book of Exodus, they were able to perform miracles as well.

And in the New Testament, the same thing is warned against. In 2 Thessalonians and in Jesus' own words in Matthew, there are counterfeit miracles around. They are miracles, but they're performed by people who are not God's spokespeople or God's prophets.

So how do we test? The test comes at the end of verse 2 and into verse 3. These people also say, let us follow other gods whom you've not known and let us serve them.

[9 : 39] You must not heed the words of those prophets or those who divine by dreams. The test is not a test of the experience.

The test is a test of whom they guide you to worship. These false prophets say, having predicted things that come true or perform miracles, they say, let's go and serve other gods.

Now, I'm not sure it's quite as blunt and blatant as standing up in the pulpit here and saying, come on, let's go out of here and worship Baal or some other god. It's probably more seductive than that.

But in the end, in the effect, the path they are leading down is a path to worship another god. That's the test. Whom are they leading you to worship?

Now, notice who it is right to worship in the language of verses 2 to 5. In verse 2, you'll see in the brackets, they've said before that, let us follow other gods whom you have not known.

[10 : 43] That is, the god whom you worship is the god whom you've known. A god who's been revealed to you. You're in a relationship with him already.

Further down in verse 3, it goes on to say, for the Lord your god is testing you. And the word for lord, you can see in capital letters there, is literally the name Jehovah or Yahweh.

That is, a personal name of god, a known god. It's a bit like in more formal times, you might meet somebody called Mr. Smith.

And so for a while you say, hello Mr. Smith, how are you? After a period of time, as the relationship builds, Mr. Smith might say to you, please call me John. And so thereafter you call him John.

That is, it's an act of friendship, an act of relationship, to be told by Mr. Smith that you could say John. Earlier on, God, the God Almighty, said to Moses, you and Israel can call me Jehovah, Yahweh.

[11 : 49] It's an act of relationship, an act of friendship between God and his people. You don't have to call me Lord God Almighty, call me Jehovah.

And so embedded here, in the language about the God who is known, is that he's in a relationship with Israel. He's revealed his name to be Yahweh because of that relationship, that friendship, that revelation of who God is.

And then down in verse 5, more about this God is spoken because it says there that this living God, Yahweh, has brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery.

He's acted for you. He's your God, who's redeemed you, saved you, paid for your release from slavery. So the three things about God that are crucial here is that the real God is revealed, he's in a relationship, and he's the redeemer God.

If any prophet, no matter what miracle or prediction they say comes true, leads you away from the God who's revealed in a relationship with you and has redeemed you, then verse 3 says, don't follow.

[13 : 01] Don't go. That's the test of experience, of miracles, of healings, of predictions and prophecies that come true. Are they leading you to worship the God who you are in a relationship with, who's revealed himself, who's redeemed you, or not?

You see, experience needs to be scrutinized. And the test is a theology worship test, not just simply experience equals truth and power.

Now for us who live 2,000 years after Jesus and 3,500 years nearly after Moses, this focus on the living God is sharper and more clear even for us.

For the God who's revealed himself, 1,400 years after Moses, revealed himself more fully in the person of Jesus Christ. The God with whom we are in a relationship with has enabled that relationship through Jesus Christ, who's brought us peace with God and enables us to call God not just even Jehovah or Yahweh, but indeed our heavenly father.

And the God who redeemed Israel from slavery has done a greater act of redemption in redeeming us from our sins when his son Jesus Christ died on the cross as we commemorated last Friday week.

[14 : 24] So the test for us is even clearer than it was for ancient Israel. Is the worship of these prophets, even if what they say is true or the miracles they perform are real, are they leading us to the worship of God in Jesus Christ or not?

Now why is this so important? Firstly, it's important because it's not always obvious who a false prophet is by what they do, by their predictions that come true and by their healings and so on.

And doubly so because the circumstance here is that a false prophet may arise within Israel. See, it's fairly clear if somebody's out there in the world, they're not professing Christian faith and they do all sorts of things, we're not probably going to jump and follow them.

The danger is within the family of God's people, within the church as we know it today, within ancient Israel as it was in the times of Moses. False prophets can be very deceptive in the language that they use.

We need to discern where they're guiding us. But secondly, this is important because falsehood is so deceptive and alluring. Falsehood is attractive.

[15 : 34] Falsehood leads us into paths often of our own selves in control other than God. Falsehood promises good things.

Remember the serpent in the Garden of Eden to Adam and Eve promising them good things that he couldn't deliver. So it's easy to be seduced by the vain promises of falsehood.

That's why this is important. Thirdly, it's important because our own day and age is so fascinated by spiritual phenomena. You see it in the number of films that have the paranormal supernatural themes.

Our fascination with people who are supposedly able to speak with the dead or predict things that come true or perform miracles or whatever. Our fascination with visions and those sorts of things as well.

So in our new age of mysticism, in our age of attraction of supernatural things, which I'm sure has been actually part of every age ever since Jesus and beyond, we have to be careful because not every spirit is of God.

[16 : 39] Fourthly, this is important, I think, because our culture is so experiential. Experience matters for people and the slogan of our world and society is, my experience is my truth.

Experience for many matters more than truth. But what we're being taught here is that experience needs to be critiqued by the truths of God revealed in the scriptures.

So truth needs to critique and interpret experience. And fifthly, this is important because as verse 3 says, the Lord your God is testing you to know whether you indeed love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul.

The idea that God tests us is commonplace in scripture. God tested Abram, you remember, with that frightening test of Abram taking his son up a mountain to sacrifice the son.

Of course, he didn't do it. God backed down and said, here's a ram, sacrifice the ram itself and not your son. But it was a test of faith of Abram. For 40 years, Israel had been in the wilderness.

[17 : 49] This is at the end of this period when Deuteronomy is first spoken. That was a testing time for Israel to test what was in their hearts, whether they truly loved God or not. They failed that test. Even God's own son Jesus was tested with 40 days in the wilderness, tested by the serpent or the devil there in the wilderness.

And the reason why God tests us is that through testing, our faith is proven, strengthened, deepened, honed. It's a bit like physical exercise. Our spiritual muscle develops under duress and under testing.

If we're never tested, then our faith is easy to be flabby. And so the test here of a false prophet leading astray but actually predicting things that come true, performing miracles that might be real, is a test for us to discern is this true or not?

Do we follow or not? And remember that our testing strengthens us for our good. So the test then for us in all this spiritual experience that we're confronting our world today, does this lead to the worship of the living God?

Does it lead us to the worship of a God who's revealed himself to us, who's established a relationship with us, who has redeemed us, that is, does it lead us to the worship of the Lord Jesus Christ or not?

[19 : 16] And so whether or not my late father's wife's prediction of something significant happening at the end of October is true or not, it won't in any way validate her as some sort of spiritual guru, not that she's claiming that, because it's not necessarily leading me to the worship of God.

If you fluke a horoscope that says something so vague that you think that's exactly what's happened today, don't be misled because horoscopes actually take you far away from the worship of the living God.

We ought never to read them. If somebody claims that the Pope has healed somebody from Parkinson's disease or there's this vision of Mary that people flock to around different places in Europe and the world, don't be beguiled by that.

The vision may be true, it may not be true. In one sense, that doesn't matter. But if it's leading to the worship of Mary rather than Jesus, then we should refrain from following such visions.

Now, Deuteronomy 13 provides three circumstances and I focus simply on the first in verses 1 to 5. The second one actually cuts harder and deeper because here it's not just a false prophet or dreamer whose words come true.

[20 : 29] In verses 6 to 11, it's somebody who may be your brother, your wife or husband, somebody whom you love the most, a deepest friend, and they seek to lead you away from the living God.

That's tougher in a way. For our human relationships bond us tightly. And so the message of the second paragraph, like the first, is the test of truth matters most.

Don't be misled even by people whom you love the most on earth if they seek to lead you astray. And the third circumstance from verse 12 to the end of the chapter is if you hear of another group of Israelites in another town who've been beguiled and led astray by false prophets or dreamers and they've all followed after them, then this is how you are to respond.

And in each of the three circumstances, in the first one I focused on, in the second one where it's the person you love the most or a kinsfolk or friend, and in the third, the punishment of the misleader as well as the punishment to those misled is death.

Well, the death penalty is rightly regarded by most of us in most cases as abhorrent. It's still, of course, an issue in our culture. Think of the debate late in 2005 as the Australian Van Wyn was on death row and then executed in Singapore for bringing heroin through Singapore to Australia.

[22 : 06] Think of the ongoing debate in our culture and country of those in Bali facing the death penalty, both the Bali bombers and the Bali Nine, or some of whom, at least, are on the death row.

And the debate in our society about whether any of them should be put to death and on what criteria somebody should be put to death or not. Remember the controversial footage of Saddam Hussein just before the New Year executed in Iraq.

And I suspect here there will be varieties of opinion about when a death penalty is or is not appropriate. And for those who say that at least there are sometimes when it is, it's probably at the very extreme of mass murder, terrorism, acts of absolute abhorrence and brutality that we might countenance a death penalty.

But here in Deuteronomy 13, it's a false prophet. It's a dreamer of dreams whose dreams come true and they lead you away from God. And my guess is that most of us, if not all of us, would think the death penalty looks a bit harsh here.

Now isn't that just a sign that this is such primitive material from a barbaric age that we really shouldn't pay too much attention to it? There are some responses to that though.

[23 : 17] The first is that in God's priority, idolatry is the worst sin. It's certainly not the worst sin in Australia in 2007, but in God's priority it is.

And if somebody to whom God has revealed himself and died for on a cross turns to worship idols rather than God, then that is perhaps the worst sin of all in God's scale of things.

Secondly, if, as is the case, idolaters do not enjoy eternal life in God's heaven, then for somebody to mislead people away from life in God and in Christ is in one sense eternal murder.

And thirdly, we need to bear in mind that the harshness here is for the protection of God's people. The end of verse 5, you must purge the evil from your midst.

You don't just put a band-aid over the wrongdoing. But there's this view, rightly, that sin, if not dealt with at its core, spreads and festers like a cancer in the society of God's people.

[24 : 25] And so a harsh punishment is needed to root it out to protect God's people from being misled in the future. It reminds us that we all are vulnerable to being led astray by falsehood.

But let me hasten to add that the application then is not for us to pick up our stones or swords or Kalashnikovs and start going around slaughtering anybody who preaches falsehood.

Lots of things have changed about the nature of God's people from Old Testament Moses' times to today. The parallel, though, is excommunication from the church.

Remember, these situations are in the midst of God's people. It's not about us taking up arms against people who preach falsehood who don't profess to be in the church of God's people, but rather, how do we deal with those within?

And the Bible's application at that point for the church post-Jesus day is excommunication, forcing people out of the church for the false teaching and for the sake of the protection of church members within the church.

[25 : 34] Of course, in the Western church, excommunication is barely ever practiced, it seems to me, which contributes more and more to its own weakness and corruption. Well, the final test, when all these events and experiences are confronted by us, is not this experience is true, therefore I follow it, but rather, does this lead me to the worship of the living God, a God who's revealed himself in relationship with me, redeeming me, that is a God revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ, risen from the dead.

If it doesn't, then don't be beguiled by the experience, but refrain from following and stick to, cleave to, hold fast to the living God.

As verse 4 says, the Lord your God 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.

And for us, 2,000 years after Jesus, we can sharpen that focus more clearly. The Lord Jesus Christ you shall follow, him alone you shall fear, his commandments you shall keep, his voice you shall obey, him you shall serve, and to the Lord Jesus Christ you shall hold fast.

Amen.