

PROPHETIC PRAYER

by Kelly Tshibaka

PROPHETIC WORD

Shortly after I committed to God that I would share anything I thought He might be telling me was a word for someone else, I had an unusual dream about our new daycare provider. It was unusual first because I didn't know her well enough to have such a strong dream about her, and second because in the dream there was a phrase repeated over and over: "Don't sell yourself short. You are accomplishing more than you can imagine."

I woke up and in my half-alert middle-of-the-night state, I thought, "This might be God!" It was short, it was quiet, and it sounded loving. "Okay, Jesus. I think this might be You. And I told You that I would act on anything I thought You might be telling me. What do You want me to do with this?"

The thought came to mind that I should share the phrase with the daycare provider. My heart sank. I did *not* want to do that. I did not *know* that this was God. It wasn't even a Bible verse! And it's the middle of the night – I could just be dreaming! And I did not know what her faith was. What if she's not a Christian? What will she think when I come in with a "word from the Lord"?! I still have to see this woman, you know.

Right there in my bedroom in the wee hours of the night, faith and fear duked it out. In the end, I resolved, "I might fall flat on my face, but I'm going to step out and share this with her."

The next morning when I dropped off my daughter, I asked the woman if I could share something with her. She looked skeptical, but said, "Sure." Then I said, "I think the Lord might have given me a word for you last night." She looked even more skeptical; my heart sank. But I went for it anyway. "It might be me or it might be God, but I think He said to tell you: *'Don't sell yourself short. You are accomplishing more than you can imagine.'*"

She looked at me for what seemed like forever (it probably was just a few seconds), and then her eyes started welling up with tears. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!" she exclaimed. She

gave me a huge hug, thanking me over and over again. “Don’t thank me,” I thought. “I didn’t do anything. I don’t even know what the word means!”

She then told me that just the night before, she had been praying to God, asking Him whether she was making any difference at all. She “just” watches kids day after day. What good was she doing? Was she accomplishing anything for His kingdom? And then here I stood, first thing the very next morning, telling her that Jesus said, “*Don’t sell yourself short. You are accomplishing more than you can imagine.*”

I was astonished—maybe even more than she was! As she began profusely thanking me again, I told her, “Don’t thank me, thank God. I didn’t have anything to do with this!” She smiled and began thanking Jesus.

WHAT IS PROPHETIC PRAYER?

A discussion of prophetic prayer must first begin with an understanding of prophetic words. When used in this article, the term "prophetic prayer" refers to praying for someone prophetically. And the term "prophetic" means any word, phrase, verse, or picture that taps into the heart or thoughts of the Lord towards someone or something (a life situation, ministry venture, decision, etc.).

Prophetic Words

The purpose of a prophetic word is to strengthen, encourage, or comfort (I think of it as S.E.C.). 1 Corinthians says “*But one who prophesies strengthens others, encourages them, and comforts them.*”¹ Strengthen. Encourage. Comfort. A litmus test for words from the Lord.

These adjectives must be interpreted in context, consistent with one another. In other words, while a word might primarily strengthen, it also must have an encouraging/comforting feel to it. Similarly, a word of comfort must have a strengthening/encouraging feel to it. If we pull them out in isolation, they could lose their meaning. For example, a strengthening word that doesn't encourage or comfort might feel like "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger." The problem is, God isn't our drill sergeant. Likewise, a comforting word that doesn't encourage or strengthen might feel like "misery loves company and we're all miserable!" But God is full of hope and joy and wants to lead us to those places, too.

So if you think you have a word from the Lord for someone or something, and it won't strengthen, encourage, or comfort them, then either it's not a word from the Lord or it's something to pray, not to say. Either way, just sit on it.

Prophecy and Prophets

Prophetic words are similar to but different than prophecy. Both are words from the Lord. However, prophecy generally contains knowledge of the future (foretelling) or forthrightness

¹ 1 Corinthians 14:3

about present situations (forthtelling) (like when Jesus told the woman at the well that she was living with a man who was not her husband).² Like prophetic words, prophecy strengthens, encourages, or comforts, but it also can have a primary purpose of leading people to repentance (re-thinkness).

Prophets are seers--they see things.³ Prophecy is named as a motivational gift from God in Romans 12. These gift orientations are wired into every person, as image bearers of God, and they reflect attributes of Him. Prophets, or "perceivers" as we sometimes call them to distinguish these prophets from other prophets, tend to "see" things in black and white, right and wrong. They want others to "see" things the way they do. They tend to be blunt and forthright with others. And they seem to be able to "see" through people (which also can lead them to be critical or quick to judge).

Prophets also are named as ministry gifts in Ephesians 4. These gifts are from Jesus and are meant to be used to build up the church.⁴ Prophets proclaim timely and urgent messages from the Lord, and they have a strong understanding of Scripture. They often challenge people to make a decision for God, or for His way. They can serve as watchmen, looking out for any changes in direction for or adversaries against a church body.⁵ They often "see" things coming before others--which is useful for both defending and leading a body of believers.

While perceivers and prophets may have prophecies or more-than-usual prophetic words, you do not have to be a perceiver or a prophet to get a prophetic word for someone or something. Prophetic words come from the Holy Spirit, and He lives in every believer. So empowered by the Holy Spirit, every believer has the capacity to get a prophetic word.

WHY GOD GIVES PROPHETIC WORDS

Why does God choose to speak to us? And why does He choose to do it through other people?

God speaks to us because He loves us. The whole point of the Gospel story is that God paid the ultimate price to have relationship with us. Real relationship--here and now--is a matter of life and death for our Lord. It makes sense, then, that He is not content with speaking to us once, 2,000 years ago, and then not uttering a peep since. He is not a deistic, far removed, distant or uncaring God. He is a God who chooses to dwell within us. He reveals His Scripture to us, unfolding it to apply to our evolving life circumstances (that's why it's called the *living*

² John 4:16-18

³ 1 Samuel 9:9

⁴ Ephesians 4:11-13

⁵ Hosea 9:8

Word). He opens our ears day by day so we can hear as a disciple.⁶ And He is the voice behind us saying, *“This is the way; walk in it.”*⁷

God also chooses to work through people. Throughout Scripture, we see a pattern of God bringing about His purposes and will here on earth through faithful believers. Yes, He could do it without us. But in His wisdom, He chooses not to (maybe because He values relationship with us so much?). From Noah, to Abraham, to Rahab, to Mary, to Paul, God works through people. Isaiah wrote, *“The Lord GOD has given Me the tongue of disciples, that I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word.”*⁸ Here he was talking about prophetic words. And here we see that God speaks through us to strengthen others.

Two principles to take from all this:

- 1) do not pray prophetically or speak a prophetic word to someone you don't love: *If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.*⁹ (If you don't really know them, ask the Lord to fill you with His love for them before you speak); and
- 2) if you have a prophetic word for someone and don't share it, they're not going to hear it.

WHAT PROPHETIC WORDS SOUND LIKE

Since God is speaking through a person, prophetic words tend to sound a bit like the person through whom God is speaking. The person might use words, analogies, or experiences that are familiar to them. They might be more comforting or more direct, depending on the person. Just like the books of the Bible have different styles, emphases, and language that reflect their respective authors, so too do words from the Lord today.

Understanding this gives us some freedom in letting God work through us. We know that when He talks through us it won't sound exactly like when He talks through someone else. So we don't have to worry that we don't sound like that other person. We also can freely give permission to other people to share words from the Lord, filtering out the "them" in the message to distill what God is saying. We can have grace, all around, then for a little bit of "us" mixed into a word from God--we're His chosen vessels, after all! Just as the best wines retain flavor from their barrels, so will words from the Lord retain His “flavor” or tone.

⁶ Isaiah 50:4

⁷ Isaiah 30:21

⁸ Isaiah 50:4

⁹ 1 Corinthians 13:2

HOW PROPHETIC WORDS ARE GIVEN

Prophetic words are not to be imposed on people or delivered in a domineering way ("Thus sayeth the Lord!"). They are to be offered, without pressure, so that the one receiving the word can judge it and determine what to do with it.

Jesus' parable of the sower and the seed illustrates the approach to take when giving a prophetic word: the one sowing the seed simply puts it out there. He does not fret over it. He does not force it to grow. He does not try to control the sun, birds, or thorns. He accepts that only a portion of the seed he scatters will take root and become a bountiful crop. It is not him, but the condition of the soil that determines what happens to the seed.¹⁰

In explaining this parable, Jesus said the seed represented words from the Lord. Not just the gospel message leading to salvation, but *any* word from the Lord. Or to put it in other terms, the seed represented prophetic words--words that capture the heart of the Lord towards someone or something.

So when we offer prophetic words, we do so like the sower. We put the word out there, without worrying over it or pressuring people to receive it. ("This is a prophetic word!") We do not try to make it more effective by tackling any obstacles to it that we may see in the other person's life. We accept that the word may or may not take root and bear fruit.

The one who gives a prophetic word is responsible for sowing it (sharing it) and not adding or subtracting to what they believe the Lord has said. The one receiving a prophetic word is responsible for judging whether in fact it was from God for them,¹¹ as well as for preparing the soil of their heart so words aren't lost to the enemy, tribulations, or the pressures of this life.

WHERE TO BEGIN

Scripture

The best place to start is with scripture. In discussions with people, pay attention to or "listen for" any Bible verses, stories, or principles that come to mind. Consider how you would share the verse, story, or principle with the person--would it strengthen, encourage, or comfort? As the conversation continues, work the verse, story, or principle into the conversation. (I suggest you do this in a *non-religious* way--i.e., you might not cite the chapter and verse, or even indicate it was from the Bible, depending on the person to whom you are speaking.)

For instance, imagine that I am in a discussion with a non-believer colleague about how she is going to treat a co-worker at an upcoming meeting who treated her disrespectfully at the last meeting. What should she say to put him in his place? Should she just pretend like he doesn't

¹⁰ Matthew 13:3-9.

¹¹ 1 Thessalonians 5:21

exist? As she is talking, the thought, "the Golden Rule" comes to mind. While I might not agree that this is the approach to take, I consider it. Why did that thought come to mind? Why would *I* have thought that? Hmm. Maybe *I* didn't. So I offer it: "You know, it's a little counterintuitive in this case, but there is something extremely powerful about doing to others what you wish had been done to you. Maybe you treat him the way you wish he had treated you?"

In offering prophetic words, it is important to remember not to add to or subtract from the verse, story, or principle that came to mind. What has come to mind is what you think the Lord is saying--put it out there and let Him do what needs to be done. He says that when His word goes out, it will not return to Him void.¹² We often have no idea what God is up to in someone's life, but if we censor or add to His word for them, then our pride ("I know better than God what needs to be said") can get in the way of what He is doing.

For example, I met a woman for lunch who I didn't know that well, but had asked me for pastoral counsel on an issue she was facing. As we talked, verses from John 14 came to mind about Jesus revealing Himself to the ones who love Him. It seemed like it would encourage her to hear this, so I pulled out my Bible to share the actual verses (I didn't have them memorized). As I read through the verses, I realized that I couldn't really share the part I wanted to share without talking about obedience (and the lack thereof) too. I had no reason to address disobedience in this woman's life, but I couldn't share the verses without talking about it, so I just read them as they were:

"Jesus replied, 'All who love me will do what I say. My Father will love them, and we will come and make our home with each of them. Anyone who doesn't love me will not obey me. And remember, my words are not my own. What I am telling you is from the Father who sent me.'"

I then explained what I saw in these verses that I thought would encourage her: the Lord will show her what to do because He loves her. I also semi-apologized for all the obedience talk, as I wasn't trying to say she needed to obey in something.¹³

Tears welled up in her eyes as she explained how grateful she was that I shared the verses, especially the obedience part, because she was struggling with a much bigger decision than the one we had been talking about—she was starting to date a man she knew God did not want her to date. She was planning on going out with him that night, but because of the verses, she cancelled the date.

Imagine what could have happened if I had not read the verses that came to mind but instead paraphrased what I thought they had said? It is very important not to add to or subtract from what God says.

¹² Isaiah 55:11

¹³ John 14:23-24

Choosing to Share

Next to Scripture, the only other thing needed for a prophetic word to happen is someone willing to say it. After all, if it's not shared, then it's just a word. And it's about as good as a dusty Bible sitting on a bookshelf.

I've got this crazy idea that God has a hard time finding people to work through. I call it crazy because I know countless people (myself included) who want to be used by God. But I don't see countless prophetic words flying around. Moreover, I see many instances in scripture of God desperately seeking for someone through whom to work, or finding only a faithful few through whom He can. Like Jesus being brokenhearted that there are few laborers to go into the harvest,¹⁴ or the Lord asking in the presence of Isaiah, "*Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?*"¹⁵

I have sat on promptings that I thought might be from the Lord, too. Mostly because if they weren't, then I would be really embarrassed. But then I realized that I would rather lose face every now and then than ever hold back a word from the Lord for someone. If I don't say it, then they may never hear it--He chooses to work through people, many of whom choose not to step out. So if not me, then who? If there was someone else, then why is He prompting me? I would rather risk losing some pride than risk losing out on an opportunity to be used by God for someone else. And I wish others would run the same risk for me. I think we could all do with a little more strength, encouragement, and comfort from the Lord.

Stepping out there to share a prophetic word can be nerve-racking, though. Even if you've resolved that you're going to share, it's a lot harder to do it when the time comes! A way to make it easier is to say to the person, "This might be me, or it might be God, but (and then share what you think the word is)." This approach gives you permission up front to share something that might not be from God, and it lets the other person know that you're not imposing something on them, or claiming something is from God when it's not.

HOW TO PRAY PROPHETICALLY

Praying prophetically is an extension of getting and sharing prophetic words. Just like how you can offer prophetic words in the course of an average discussion or during a dedicated ministry time, you also can pray prophetically during any time of prayer.

Specifically, prophetic prayer happens when, as you are praying for someone, you "hear" a word from God. You can turn that word into a prayer and pray it over them. For example, "Lord, I thank you that she has built her house on the Rock and that her foundation is in You." Or you can share it with them: "I think the Lord is saying that He sees you as someone who

¹⁴ Matthew 9:36-38

¹⁵ Isaiah 6:8

has chosen to build your house on the Rock. You will weather this storm because of your faith in Him."¹⁶

As with prophetic words in general, it is best to start with Scripture when praying prophetically because you know that all Scripture is from God (it's applicability to someone at any given time is another matter). However, God does not always talk through Scripture alone (though everything He says is consistent with Scripture), so it is important to listen to what it is He is saying and not to restrict it.

For example, one time I was leading a group through an exercise to introduce them to praying prophetically. I told them to find a partner, put their hands on the person's shoulders, and wait for a Bible verse or story to come to mind, and then pray it.

My partner was a guy who I never had met before. I put my hands on his shoulders and waited. The only thing that came to mind is, "I am not ashamed of you." I waited some more. The phrase repeated. I thought, "That's nice, God, but that wasn't the assignment. Do you have a Bible verse to go with it?" Nothing. But the phrase repeated, again.

"Okay," I thought. "I am going to look like a total idiot saying this, since I *gave* the assignment requiring a Bible verse, but I would rather risk my pride than risk missing God on this, so..." I closed my eyes harder--I didn't want to watch. Then I said, "Um, the only thing that's coming to mind is, 'I am not ashamed of you.'" The guy started weeping! So much so that he couldn't speak! I didn't know what to say (best not to add anything!), so I asked him if I could continue praying for him. He nodded yes, and I prayed. That's when the Bible verses started flowing like a river! After I finished, he told me the greatest obstacle he faced in his walk with God had always been a belief that God was ashamed of Him. He said that me sharing "I am not ashamed of you" during our time of prayer changed his whole identity.

Listen. Evaluate. Share. No more, no less. And watch lives be changed before your eyes!

OBSERVING WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

1. As you read the Bible, see if anyone comes to mind as you read a particular verse. Reflect on the verse and what you think God might want to say to the person to strengthen, encourage, or comfort them. Share it with them.
2. In conversations with people this week, listen for Bible verses or principles that may come to mind. Work them into the conversation in a way that strengthens, encourages, or comforts the other person.

¹⁶ Matthew 7:24-27

3. Practice praying prophetically with a partner. Put your hands on their shoulders and wait for a Bible verse, story, or principle to come to mind (1-2 minutes should suffice). Turn it into a prayer and pray it over them.
4. Offer to pray for someone (it can be about anything, even while saying grace!). As you are praying, listen for any Bible verses, stories, or principles that come to mind. Even if they are not related to the topic about which you are supposed to be praying, work them into the prayer.