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Prophet Jim Smith. December 2004

The character of the Christian prophet

One day, the Lord called me in the spirit to meet with him. When I was in his presence, I saw that there was a great sadness in his heart. He began to share it with me. More and more sorrow poured from him - sorrow for his creation. At first I could manage to cope, but after some time I cried out “Lord, I cannot take any more of your sorrow.” He looked at me and said “What kind of friend are you, that limits your love for me?” This profound experience changed my understanding of my call as a prophet. I began to realise that being a prophet was so much more than giving words or visions. It was a relationship with God, at a deep and profound level. But how was I supposed to move forward in my understanding? How could I, a mere human, develop this intimate relationship with God, which seemed to be what he wanted?

The only way was to get a deeper understanding of the character of Jesus. In this way, I could find the character which God wanted for me. I have shared here the things I discovered. If you are a prophet, then you too, like me, must seek the character of Jesus. Do away with all the rubbish which Africa piles on to you - the demand for words, for “my personal word” or for “my own personal miracle.” Seek with me not words, but a relationship with God which will give you access to more powerful ministry than you ever thought possible. Seek with me the character of the Christian prophet – the character or Jesus.

Getting close

“You are my son, who I love.” In this verse, (Mark 1:11) the Father is speaking about Jesus. It’s a lovely thing for Him to say. We all want the character which will cause Father to say of us “This prophet is my beloved.” But there is a high cost to having this closeness to the Father, which many prophets want to ignore. They want to be close, but they won’t pay the price. Look what Jesus had to experience.

First, there is Gethsemane. (Luke 22:39-46) Here we can see the deep inner personal struggle which Jesus had to pass through, in order to carry out his mission. His friends were unable or unwilling to take the lonely path with him. So he had to endure the deep pain of being pulled in two different directions alone. Those directions? On the one hand the will of God and on the other the natural human desire to avoid suffering and pain. The

intensity of the struggle was so great, that an angel came to strengthen him. The sweat of the struggle was like blood dripping from him. All this was and is part of Jesus' relationship with God, and it will be part of ours as well. We, like him are called on to enter a relationship of deep intensity, of agony and struggle, of pain and crying out. As we struggle with the intensity of emotional pain so does God. The problem for us is that this intensity flowing from him is so great, that "it almost crushes us." To this we are called. In this position we are challenged to stand, and to stay, however great the pressure and desire to run away. We have to see that the character of Jesus was such that he did not run away from this intense relationship. His willingness to enter into the relationship, and stay in it when the pain was unbearable must be ours also.

Second, just in case we didn't get the message, we have to come to the cross. Here in agony of spirit, Jesus, crushed by the burden of sin, by isolation and loneliness, and by separation, cries out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34) Gethsemane was very painful, but it was not enough. Jesus had to go further, and so must we. For us the message is clear - this deep personal relationship in which we stand is going to hurt us, damage us, cost us everything, AND we still have to go on standing in it, even if we seem to be losing. Jeremiah would have understood. Study these passages, known as his "Confessions." In them, we experience again the agony and struggle of a close walk with God.

- 11:18-23:** "I had been like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter"
12:1-6: "Why does the way of the wicked prosper?"
15:10-21: "Alas my mother, that you gave me birth."
17:14-18: "Where is the word of the Lord?"
18:18-23: "Let's make plans against Jeremiah."
20:7-13: "O Lord you deceived me.."
20:14-18 "Cursed be the day I was born."

Staying close to God – it takes a strong character, and it forms a strong character. Study Mark 14 and 15, and begin to pray for the courage to stay close.

Incarnation of the word in our lives

When God was planning to save us, he could have just sent a book, and said "Do what it says here, and you will live." But he understood us too well. He knew we would never get the message. So he went down a different route. He became flesh in the womb of Mary. He incarnated himself into his creation, and then lived the message he had come to bring, even to the point of death. That's why the message of Jesus is so clear to us. The same principle applies to those who prophecy in his name. ***We must live the word in our hearts and lives.*** Many young prophets fail to grasp this message. They think the word comes from their mouths. But they have to learn that not only does the word come from the heart, it also has to touch and shape that heart, before it can be shared.

Hosea makes this very clear to all prophets. He had to live his message. It was written in his marriage and family life. But as the years went by, he grew in understanding of his message, and it's relationship to God's people. Study these passages:-

- He marries his prostitute wife. (1:2-3)**
- The children are named with a clear link to his call and message. (1:4-11)**
- The message of punishment and restoration. (Ch: 2.)**
- Reconciliation with his wife. (Ch: 3)**
- Israel's sinfulness. (Ch: 4-50)**
- God's longing for the return of his beloved. (Ch: 6)**
- Israel's continued sin. (Ch: 7-10)**
- God shows his love, as Hosea has had to show it to his wife. (Ch: 11)**
- More rebellion. (Ch: 11-13)**
- The homeward call and blessing. (Ch: 14)**

I did a long tour of the Far East some years ago, not long after coming out of hospital with dysentery. Half way through tour, I had to rest for some days. I lay on my bed, and began to think of the prophetic message for the next city. It was a message about the spiritual death of the city. As I reflected on this, I realised that to truly live it, I would have to die. I thought long and hard, and I was afraid. After some hours, I said "OK God. If that's what you want, you must have it." There was a long silence, and I thought God was going to need me to die. Then he said to me:- "You will not die. But I needed to know that you would die if necessary." This was my painful introduction into becoming my message. It was hard, but it changed my relationship to God, and my understanding of what I was doing as a prophet. The character of the Christian prophet has to be able to bear this strain. Otherwise, we are never truly like Jesus, and we never reach the fullness of our calling.

Compassion

It's so easy to be a prophet! Receive a word, share a word, and move on. What could be easier? This way looks good, but it is not the character of Jesus. When he looked at the crowds, the Bible says "He had compassion on them." (Matthew 9:36) The word "compassion" doesn't come across well in English. In the original Greek, the word means emotion so strong that the bowels are moved. Jesus cared about the people, and the ministry he brought to them flowed from that deep compassion.

The word we bring cannot be separated from the feelings we have for those who receive it. This is a very heavy burden to bear, but if we cannot bear it, we become the kind of prophet I described above – get a word, give a word, and move on. This shallow character denies us access to the heart and nature of Jesus, and denies the people access to that heart as well.

I was in a south American city, preaching to a large congregation. It was a very hard word, and as I began to share it, people began to cry. I looked up to God, and said “I can’t go on. I am hurting your people.” But as I looked at Father, I saw that he was crying. “If you do not continue” he said, “you will be hurting me.” I carried on, but after a short time, more people were crying. Again I looked up to heaven and cried out “I can’t go on. I am hurting your people.” I got the same reply - “If you don’t go on, you will be hurting me.” This was a agonising position to be in. The pain of the people and the compassion of God were pulling me apart. I was sick for a week after this preaching. Sharing God’s compassion is very hard for our human nature.

Yet this is the very character of Jesus, and it must be ours as well.

Uncompromising out of love

One day, a very earnest young man came to Jesus “Lord” he said “what must I do to gain eternal life?” Jesus replied “You know all the commandments. Keep them and you will live.” The young man replied “But Lord, I have kept them all!” What a saint he must have been!! But Jesus loved him – loved him for his youth, his foolish statement, his desire for truth. But he did not invite him to become a disciple. Instead he said “One thing is missing. Go home, sell all you have and give to the poor. Then you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” (Mark 10:17-22)

Would you have done that? I want people to give their lives to Jesus, and to follow him. I do all I can to help them. But here Jesus seems to say something which drives the man away. The Bible says “At this, the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.” And it gets worse! Jesus made no attempt to stop him, to follow him, to get his name and address, or to send him books to read. No! He just lets him go. Jesus never compromises his message, because he truly loves people. In this story he is showing his great love for this man. He shows him the truth about himself, gives him a chance to put things right, and then invites him to follow. Sadly, the man did not want the truth, and he went away. I’ve always hoped that at a latter date, he did come back.

The character of Jesus is so loving, that he does not compromise. He loves us too much to give us anything but the whole truth, and he loves us so much that he lets us make the decisions, and let’s us live with them. This is a key element of the character of the Christian prophet. We speak the uncompromised truth, because we truly love the body. Then we let the body accept, ignore or reject our message.

We make no attempt to force people to accept our message. Unfortunately, the uncompromising love of Jesus is often not the love which is in the hearts of prophets. We are human, and we like to be liked. We are human, and we don’t like hurting people. We are human, and we have bills to pay, so we need people to accept and support us. Yet if we give way to any of these feelings, we are abandoning the character of Jesus. How can we go forward? The only way we can be uncompromising with a loving heart is to stand closer to Jesus day by day. Then we will see with his eyes, and feel with his heart. Then we will take on his nature. This is not easy, and it gets harder the longer we exercise our prophetic ministry.

I was booked to preach a week long mission of repentance in South America. On the first night, the Church was packed, and I spoke about the burden and responsibility on God's people when a Nation falls away from God. The second night, I continued on the same subject, and night by night, attendance grew less and less. By Saturday, we were down to one row of people. The Pastor of the Church was very upset. He wanted me to preach something different. He felt that I wasn't being fair on them. The pressure on me was great, but I just kept thinking "God loves this Nation. There are millions of people in this land, and the people of God must take their responsibilities seriously, or millions will be lost." So I carried on. On Sunday, after I had preached much the same message, one of the leaders of the Church came up to me and said "Now I understand your message. All week, I have been angry with you, because you would not compromise. I wanted a nice message for our church. But this morning, now I understand. Pray for me that I will be able to hold on to what you have said." Uncompromising love had won the day in his heart. Alleluia! But prophets be warned, he was the only one of the hundreds of leaders there who came to speak to me. The rest went away angry.

Commitment to the ways of God, whatever the cost

For a prophet, everything has to be done God's way, whatever the cost. This brought Nathan into conflict with David; (2 Samuel 12:1-14) Jeremiah in conflict with Israel's leaders: (Jeremiah 26) Amos in conflict with Amaziah; (Amos 7:10-17) Micaiah ben Imlah in conflict with Ahab, (1 Kings 22:1-28) Jonah in conflict with God, (Jonah 1) and Jesus in conflict with the world, the flesh and the devil. Prophets are constantly getting into trouble with the people of God because of the way we work and the things we say and do. We wish it did not have to be so, but we have to do things God's way. We cannot help ourselves. Things have to be done His way, and for us that's all there is to it.

We have inherited this characteristic from Jesus. On three separate occasions, Jesus told his followers that he was on his way to Jerusalem and certain death. (Mark 8:31-32: Mark 9: 30-32: Mark 10:32-34) They didn't understand, they didn't like it and they tried to make him change his mind. But for Jesus, it had to be this way. It wasn't easy for him, as we see clearly in Gethsemane:- "Father everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me."(Mark 14:36) But there was no other way but God's way, so it had to be that way.

My own life as a prophet is powerfully controlled by this principle. For me, there is a job which I must do in Africa. There is not the financial support for what I have to do, I don't have a big team, I don't have a big administrative back up, and I live by faith. This is a hard struggle, but I have to do things this way, because I know that this is God's way for me. I have been in despair many times, and I have tried to give up, or get a better support. But God always replies with the same thing – "my grace is sufficient for you." People have tried to persuade me to change my ways. They might as well save their breath! It has to be done this way, because I know that this is God's way for me. God's people sometimes see this as arrogance in us. We have to guard our behaviour of course, so that we are not, even accidentally, being arrogant. But fundamentally it is not

arrogance, it is our character showing through. Like our Master, we are not easily changed in our ways, once we know they are His ways.

The heart of a servant

Jesus had a servant heart. He said of himself “The son of man came not to be served, but to serve..(Mark 10:45) This is something we all agree with on paper, but find it hard to accept in reality. For being a servant runs counter to our human nature, which wants success, position, and power. These dangerous anti servant qualities can so easily upset the character of a prophet. We have powerful ministries, and seem to know things that are hidden to others. It is too easy for us to use these gifts to get people to respect us, to look up to us, to give us support and prestige. These things will ultimately destroy us. Our character must be that of Jesus. Study his teaching on this:-

Mark 8: 34 “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.”

This is the character of the servant. He is one who denies himself. He has conquered his own self will, and is committed totally to the will of his master. He is one who takes up the cross. He will willingly walk the hard way, the way of suffering and apparent defeat. He will do things God’s way. He is one who follows, without question. This looks quite easy on paper, but it is very hard to achieve this character. Not only is it totally contrary to our human self will, but it angers our enemy, and so he attacks this character as hard as he can.

Luke 17: 7-10

This little parable keeps our feet firmly on the ground. We are to serve, not when it is convenient to us, or when we feel like it, but when the Master says so. Some people find this parable hard, but that is because they have short memories! Jesus went to Calvary for us, serving the will of his Father up to the very end, so that we could be free. He has earned my love, my trust and my service. Strangely, when we adopt this attitude, we find ourselves more loved, more cared for and closer to Jesus than we were before. This is one of the miracles of service.

John 13: 1-5

The message of this passage is quite simple. We must do as he has done. No one said it was going to be easy to serve.

In my own life, I have had to endure a great deal for my calling. Paul lists his sufferings in 2 Corinthians 11: 23-33 and I agree with him. I too have been sick, in danger many times, tired, exhausted, weary, unloved, unsupported and unwelcome. I have slept on floors, and gone without food for many days. I feel daily the pressure of the responsibility of my work. But I still continue to exercise my ministry as best I can. Why should I complain? I was called to serve. I am happy to be a mere doorkeeper in the house of the

Lord. I am happy to untie the sandal of the weakest member, the smallest Church. I am prepared to go on suffering the deprivations of my calling. I encourage prophets to follow my example. The servant character is the one Jesus loves the most. It is the servant who, looking the least is often the most effective and the most used.

Rejection, suffering, pain, and death

No one likes being laughed at, ridiculed, rejected, abandoned or killed. Unfortunately, enduring these things has to be part of the character of the prophet. How do we handle them, so that they do form our character, and do not destroy us?

1. Jesus knows all about it. Opposed (Mark 3:6) insulted (Mark 6:3) and ultimately rejected (John 19:12) he knows all about these feelings. He warned us that the world would reject us, as it rejected him. So when we are exposed to rejection because of our ministry, we are in good company

2. Rejection can guarantee the truth of our calling. Jesus said “ Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:11-12) Many prophets have never thought in this way. If we are totally accepted, then we are in danger of being a false prophet. I’m not suggesting that we should go around wanting to be rejected. And we must be careful that people don’t reject us because we are behaving in a bad way. But a true prophet must expect to stir up opposition, and this will result in rejection.

3. Don’t take it personally. It is Jesus who is being rejected, not us. (John 15:18)

I went to a Church in a far away country. I was told “This Church gives the biggest offerings in the city.” As you all know, I couldn’t care less about that. When I got there the Church was full, and all the elders were sitting in the front row. I brought a message of repentance, and asked for a response. All the elders sat with hard faces. I knew what they were thinking –

“How dare this Westerner come to our lovely church and say such things!” I waited and waited, and finally one young boy came to the front. “Only one?” I said to the Lord. “Yes,” he replied, “ only one.” I prayed for the boy, picked up my Bible and left. This saved them the trouble of throwing me out. On the way back to my room I felt very small. This was a powerful Church, and I had offended it. They would make sure I didn’t speak in that city again. Then I felt the Lord’s presence with me, and he spoke to me. “Son” he said “tell me which you prefer. Do you want to stay in that Church, or be out here with me?” I suddenly understood that it wasn’t me that had rejected, it was the One who had sent me. However, it still hurt!

I don’t find it easy to be isolated and rejected. But I know I have to have that character which can accept it, without getting angry, or wanting to get my own back. If I have sinned, then I have been rightly rejected. But if I have been faithful, it is Jesus they have

rejected. I have been trying to have this character ever since God called me to this ministry. After 15 years, I still don't find it easy.

Purity

Every Christian must seek after personal purity. This is part of our call to follow Jesus. But the prophet has a different experience of purity. Isaiah got it just right. He saw God, saw his own sinfulness, and cried out "Woe is me, I am ruined!" (Isaiah 6:5) The prophet stands in the presence of God – of a holy and pure God. In this position, he is powerfully aware of God's purity, and his own lack of it. We have to develop the character which will enable us to endure this agonising position. We have to be aware of the blood of Jesus, (1 John 1:7) of our rightful place in the Father's home, (Luke 15:20) and aware of the faults and failings which make up our life. (1 John 1: 8-9) If we hold these things in our spirit, we will be able to stay close to the pure fire of God. Any pretending, about ourselves, our lives, our failures – will expose us painfully to the holy God.

Young prophets are seldom aware of this issue. All they want is to receive their word, and get prophesying! God is good, and lets them do it for a while. Then one day, they have Isaiah's experience, and they are never the same again. Never the same, but better. For to know the awesome purity of God is to be a better prophet. This mark of character cannot be quickly understood, or quickly grafted in to us. It takes time. I encourage you to seek it, for it is the way to deeper prophetic experience. But like so many other things I have written here, it is not easy.

"Prophet Jim, when I started reading your book, I wanted to be a prophet. Now I'm not so sure!" I've heard this kind of remark many times, and I am truly sorry. I don't want to put anybody off. But I want to open to them the true biblical experience of a prophet, rather than the worldly one which surrounds us, and has led so many people astray. Which do you want to build your life on – the lie or the truth? I'm sure you will say "The Truth!" If that is the case, then you will have to seek, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to have formed in your the character described here. For there is no choice. We either choose to be like Jesus, or we fall into error. I'm trying to be the kind of person described in these pages. I fail again and again, but I do want to be a prophet with the character of Jesus, and so I keep trying. Why don't you join me, and together we can stumble along, supporting each other, and be changed into the kind of prophet Jesus really wants us to be.

Test your character

This is the kind of prophet which should emerge in you, if your character is being formed in line with the character of Jesus. Take time to study and to pray.

- 1. *True prophecy puts Jesus first. (Rev 19:10)***
- 2. *The true prophet loves the body of Christ. (Eph. 5:25)***
- 3. *A true prophet has, or is trying to live a pure life. (Ps 24: v 3-4)***
- 4. *A true prophet loves and uses the Bible for his ministry. (Ps 119: 105)***
- 5. *A true prophet respects the leadership. (1 Thess. 5:12)***
- 6. *A true prophet has a humble heart. (Phil 2: 5-11)***
- 7. *A true prophet wants the testing of the Church. (1 Theses. 5:21)***
- 8. *A true prophet is willing to serve. (Mark 10: 45)***
- 9. *A true prophet wants to belong to the body. (Heb. 10:25)***