

The Making of a Prophet

by T. Austin-Sparks

Prophetic ministry is not something that can be taken up, but is an eternal and divine function that requires self-emptying and a deep history of breaking and undoing.

Scripture: Genesis 3:24, Exodus 4:10, Numbers 11:14, Numbers 12:3, Deuteronomy 18:15, 1 Samuel 8:5-7, 1 Samuel 15:23, Acts 7:22, 2 Corinthians 1:9, 2 Corinthians 2:16

Topics: "Identity in Christ", "Prophetic Ministry"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes that prophetic ministry is an eternal function rooted in God's divine counsel, not merely a role one can adopt. He illustrates this through the symbolism of the Cherubim and the life of Moses, highlighting that true prophets are shaped by their experiences and must undergo a process of self-emptying to embody God's thoughts. Sparks argues that the identity of the prophet is inseparable from their message, and that genuine prophetic ministry arises from a deep, personal relationship with God, rather than academic training. He stresses the importance of humility and the necessity for prophets to be molded by their trials, ultimately becoming living expressions of God's truth. The sermon concludes with the idea that prophetic ministry is a life lived in alignment with God's will, rather than a set of teachings or doctrines.

Transcript

Prophetic ministry is something which has not come in with time, but is eternal. It has come out of the eternal counsels.

Perhaps you wonder what that means. Well, we remember that, without any explanation or definition, something comes in right at the beginning and takes the place of government in the economy of God, and involves this very function. When Adam sinned and was expelled from the garden, the Word simply says, God "placed at the east of the garden of Eden the Cherubim... to keep the way of the tree of life" (Genesis 3:24).

Who or what are the Cherubim? Where do they come from? We have heard nothing about them before; no explanation of them is given. It simply is a statement. God put them there to guard the way of the tree of life. They have become the custodians of life, to hold things according to God's thought. For the thoughts of man's heart have departed from God's thoughts and have become evil; everything has been marred; and now the custodians of the Divine thought about the greatest of all things for man - Divine life, uncreated life - the custodians of that, the Cherubim, are placed there.

But later we are given to understand what the Cherubim are like: this symbolic, composite representation has a four-fold aspect - the lion, the ox, the man and the eagle; and we are given to understand very clearly that the predominant feature is the man. It is a man, really, with three other aspects, those of the lion, the ox, and the eagle. The lion is a symbol of kingship or dominion; the ox, of service and sacrifice; the eagle, of heavenly glory and mystery. The man, the predominant aspect of the Cherubim - what is that?

We know that throughout the Scriptures the man takes the place, in the Divine order of things, of the prophet, the representative of God. The representation of God's thoughts is a man. That was the intention in the creation of Adam in the image and likeness of God - to be the personal embodiment and expression of all God's thoughts. That is what man was created for. That is what we find in the Man, the Man who was God manifested in the flesh. He was the perfect expression of all God's thoughts.

Where has this symbolism of the Cherubim come from? It is simply brought in. It comes out from eternity. It is a Divine, an eternal thought, and it takes charge of things, to hold things for God. So that man - and we know that phrase "the Son of man" - is peculiarly related to the prophetic office, and the prophetic function is an eternal thing, which just comes in. It is, in its very nature, the representation of Divine thoughts, and it is to hold God's thoughts in purity and in fullness. That is the idea related to the man, to the prophet, and that is the prophetic function and nature.

THE IDENTITY OF THE PROPHET WITH HIS MESSAGE

But what does that carry with it? Here we come to the most important point of the whole. It is the absolute identity of the vessel with the vessel's ministry. Prophetic ministry is not something that you can take up. It is something that you are. No academy can make you a prophet. Samuel instituted the schools of the prophets. They were for two purposes - one, the dissemination of religious knowledge, and the other, the writing up of the chronicles of religious history. In Samuel's day there was no open vision; the people had lost the Word of God. They had to be taught the Word of God again, and the chronicles of the ways of God had to be written up and put on record for future generations, and the schools of the prophets were instituted in the main for that purpose. But there is a great deal of difference between those academic prophets and the living, anointed prophets. The academic prophets became members of a profession and swiftly degenerated into something unworthy. All the false prophets came from schools of prophets, and were accepted publicly on that ground. They had been to college and were accepted. But they were false prophets. Going to a religious college does not of itself make you a prophet of God.

My point is this - the identity of the vessel with its ministry is the very heart of Divine thought. A man is called to represent the thoughts of God, to represent them in what he is, not in something that he takes up as a form or line of ministry, not in something that he does. The vessel itself is the ministry and you cannot divide between the two.

THE NECESSITY FOR SELF-EMPTYING

That explains everything in the life of the great prophets. It explains the life of Moses, the prophet whom the Lord God raised up from among his brethren (Deut. 18:15,18). Moses essayed to take up his life-work. He was a man of tremendous abilities, "learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians" (Acts 7:22), with great natural qualifications and gifts, and then somehow he got some conception of a life-work for God. It was quite true; it was a true conception, a right idea; he was very honest, there was no question at all about his motives; but he essayed to take up that work on the basis of what he was naturally, with his own ability,

qualifications and zeal, and on that basis disaster was allowed to come upon the whole thing.

Not so are prophets made; not so can the prophetic office be exercised. Moses must go into the wilderness and for forty years be emptied out, until there is nothing left of all that as a basis upon which he can have confidence to do the work of God or fulfil any Divine commission. He was by nature a man "mighty in his words and works"; and yet now he says, "I am not eloquent... I am slow of speech..." (Exodus 4:10). There has been a tremendous undercutting of all natural facility and resource, and I do not think that Moses was merely disagreeable in his reply to God. He did not say in effect, 'You would not allow me to do it then, so I will not do it now.' I think he was a man who was under the Divine discipline and yet on top of it. A man who is really under things and who has become petulant does not respond to little opportunities of helping people. We get a glimpse of Moses at the beginning of his time in the wilderness (Exodus 2:16,17) which suggests that he was not of that kind. When there was difficulty at the well, over the watering of the flocks, if Moses had been in a bad mood, cantankerous, disagreeable because the Lord had not seemed to stand by him in Egypt, he probably would have sat somewhere apart and looked on and done nothing to help. But he went readily to help, in a good spirit, doing all he could. He was on top of his trial. Little things indicate where a man is.

We go through times of trial and test under the hand of God, and it is so easy to get into that frame of mind which says in effect, 'The Lord does not want us, He need not have us!' We let everything go, we do not care about anything; we have gone down under our trials and we are rendered useless. I do not believe the Lord ever comes to a person like that to take them up. Elijah, dispirited, fled to the wilderness, and to a cave in the mountains; but he had to get somewhere else before the Lord could do anything with him. "What doest thou here, Elijah?" (I Kings 19:9). The Lord never comes to a man and recommissions him when he is in despair. 'God shall forgive thee all but thy despair' (F. W. H. Myers, 'St. Paul') - because despair is lost faith in God, and God can never do anything with one who has lost faith.

Moses was emptied to the last drop, and yet he was not angry or disagreeable with God. What was the Lord doing? He was making a prophet. Beforehand, the man would have taken up an office, he would have made the prophetic function serve him, he would have used it. There was no inward, vital relationship between the man and the work that he was to do; they were two separate things; the work was objective to the man. At the end of forty years in the wilderness he is in a state for this to become subjective; something has been done. There has been brought about a state which makes the man fit to be a living expression of the Divine thought. He has been emptied of his own thoughts to make room for God's thoughts; he has been emptied of his own strength, that all the energy should be of God.

Is not that perhaps the meaning of the fire and the bush that was not consumed? It is a parable, maybe a larger parable, but I think in the immediate application it was saying something to Moses. 'Moses, you are a very frail creature, a common bush of the desert, a bit of ordinary humanity, nothing at all of resource in yourself; but there is a resource, which can carry you on and on, and you can be maintained, without being consumed, by an energy that is not your own - the Spirit of God, the energy of God.' That was the great lesson this prophet had to learn. 'I cannot!' 'All right', said the Lord, 'but I AM.'

A great deal is made of the natural side of many of the Lord's servants, and usually with tragic results. A lot is made of Paul. 'What a great man Paul was naturally, what intellect he had, what training, what tremendous abilities!' That may all be true, but ask Paul what value it was to him when he was right up against a spiritual situation. He will cry, "Who is sufficient for these things? ... Our sufficiency is from God" (II Cor. 2:16; 3:5). Paul was taken through experiences where he, like Moses, despaired of life. He said,

"We... had the sentence of death within ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead" (II Cor. 1:9).

MESSAGE INWROUGHT BY ACTUAL EXPERIENCE

You see, the principle is at work all the time, that God is going to make the ministry and the minister identical. You see it in all the prophets. The Lord stood at nothing. He took infinite pains. He worked even through domestic life, the closest relationships of life. Think of the tragedy of Hosea's domestic life. Think of Ezekiel, whose wife the Lord took away in death at a stroke. The Lord said, 'Get up in the morning, anoint your face, allow not the slightest suggestion of mourning or tragedy to be detected; go out as always before, as though nothing had happened; show yourself to the people, go about with a bright countenance, provoke them to enquire what you mean by such outrageous behaviour.' The Lord brought this heartbreak upon him and then required him to act thus. Why? Ezekiel was a prophet; he had got to embody his message, and the message was this: 'Israel, God's wife, has become lost to God, dead to God, and Israel takes no notice of it; she goes on the same as ever, as though nothing had happened.' The prophet must bring it home by his own experience. God is working the thing right in. He works it in in deep and terrible ways in the life of His servant to produce ministry.

God is not allowing us to take up things and subjects. If we are under the Holy Ghost, He is going to make us prophets; that is, He is going to make the prophecy a thing that has taken place in us, so that what we say is only making vocal something that has been going on, that has been done in us. God has been doing it through years in strange, deep, terrible ways in some lives, standing at nothing, touching everything; and the vessel, thus wrought upon, is the message. People do not come to hear what you have to teach. They have come to see what you are, to see that thing which has been wrought by God. What a price the prophetic instrument has to pay!

So Moses went into the wilderness, to the awful undoing of his natural life, his natural mentality; to be brought to zero; to have the thing wrought in him. And was God justified? - for after all it was a question of resource for the future. Oh, the strain that was going to bear down upon that life! Sometimes Moses well-nigh broke; at times he did crack under the strain. "I am not able to bear all this people alone, because it is too heavy for me" (Num. 11:14). What was his resource? Oh, if it had been the old resource of Egypt he would not have stood it for a year. He could not stand provocation in Egypt, he must rise up and fight. He broke down morally and spiritually under that little strain away back there forty years before. What would he do with these rebels? How long would he put up with them? A terrific strain was going to bear down upon him, and only a deep inwrought thing, something that had been done inside, would be enough to carry through when it was a case of standing against the stream for God's full thought.

With us, too, the strain may be terrific; oft-times there will come the very strong temptation - 'Let go a little, compromise a little, do not be so utter; you will get more open doors if you will only broaden out a bit; you can have a lot more if you ease up!' What is going to save you in that hour of temptation? The only thing is that God has done this thing in you. It is part of your very being - not something you can give up; it is you, your very life. That is the only thing. God knew what He was doing with Moses. The thing had got to be so much one with the man that there was no dividing between them. The man was the prophetic ministry.

He was rejected by his brethren; they would not have him. "Who made thee a prince and a judge over us?" (Ex. 2:14). That is the human side of it. But there was the Divine side. It was of God that he went into the wilderness for forty years. It had to be, from God's side. It looked as though it was man's doing. But it

was not so. These two things went together. Rejection by his brethren was all in line with the sovereign purpose of God. It was the only way in which God got the opportunity He needed to reconstitute this man. The real preparation of this prophet took place during the time that his brethren repudiated him. Oh, the sovereignty of God, the wonderful sovereignty of God! A dark time, a deep time; a breaking, crushing, grinding time; emptied out. It seems as if everything is going, that nothing will be left. Yet all that is God's way of making prophetic ministry.

A MESSENGER DIVINELY ATTESTED

I expect that Moses at the beginning would have been very legalistic, laying down the law - 'You must do this and that' - and so on; an autocrat or despot. When, after those years, we find him coming off the wheel, out of the hands of the Potter, he is said to be "very meek, above all the men that were upon the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3), and God could stand by him then. He could not stand by him on that day when he rose up in a spirit of pride, arrogance, self-assertiveness. God had to let that work itself out to its inevitable consequence. But when Moses, as the meekest of men, the broken, humble, selfless man, was challenged by others as to his office - at such a time Moses did not stand up for his position, his rights; he just handed the matter over to the Lord. His attitude was, 'We will allow the Lord to decide. I have no personal position to preserve: if the Lord has made me His prophet, let Him show it. I am prepared to go out of office if it is not of the Lord.' What a different spirit! And the Lord did stand by him marvelously and mightily on those occasions, and terribly so for those who opposed themselves (Numbers 12:2ff.; 16:3ff.).

PROPHETIC MINISTRY A LIFE, NOT TEACHING

Well, what is a prophet? what is the prophetic function? It is this. God takes hold of a vessel (it may be individual or it may be collective: the function of prophetic ministry may move through a people, as it did through Israel), and He takes that vessel through a deep history, breaking and undoing, disillusioning, revolutionising the whole mentality, so that things which were held fiercely, assertively, are no longer so held. There is developed a wonderful pliability, adjustableness, teachableness. Everything that was merely objective as to the work of God, as to Divine truth, as to orthodoxy or fundamentalism, all that was held so strongly, in an objective, legalistic way, as to what is right and wrong in methods - it is all dealt with, all broken. There is a new conception entirely, a new outlook upon things; no longer a formal system, something outside you which you take up, but something wrought in an inward way in the vessel. It is what the vessel is that is its ministry. It is not what it has accepted of doctrine and is now teaching.

Oh, to get free of all that horrible realm of things! It is a wretched realm, that of adopting teachings, taking on interpretations, being known because such and such is your line of things. Oh, God deliver us! Oh, to be brought to the place where it is a matter of life - of what God has really done in us, made of us! First He has pulverised us, and then He has reconstructed us on a new spiritual principle, and that expresses itself in ministry: what is said is coming from what has been going on behind, perhaps for years and even right up to date.

Do you see the law of prophetic function? It is that God keeps anointed vessels abreast of truth by experience. Every bit of truth that they give out in word is something that has had a history. They went down into the depths and they were saved by that truth. It was their life and therefore it is a part of them. That is the nature of prophetic ministry.

A PROPHET, TOLERANT BUT UNCOMPROMISING

Reverting to what I was saying about the change in Moses: you can see a reflection of it in the case of Samuel. I think Samuel is one of the most beautiful and lovable characters in the Old Testament, and he is called a prophet. Do you notice that although his own heart is utterly devoted to God's highest and fullest thought, and inwardly he has no compromise whatever, yet he shows a marvelous charity toward Saul during those early months? (It seems not to have gone much beyond a year, the first year of Saul's reign, during which it seems that Saul really did seek to show some semblance of good.) And yet you must remember that Saul represents the denial of the highest of all things - the direct and immediate government of God. Such government was repudiated by Israel in favour of a king - "Make us a king to judge us like all the nations", they said. God said to Samuel: "They have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me" (I Samuel 8:5-7).

Kingship was a Divine principle as much as prophecy was. The lion is there with the man. The monarch, representing God's thought of dominion, is there. But with Saul it is on a lower level. His coming in represented the bringing down of that Divine thought to the level of the world: "like all the nations" - a Divine thought taken hold of by carnal men, dragged down to the world level; and Samuel knew it. In his heart he could not accept that, and he complained to God about it; he was against this thing, for he saw what it meant. But how charitable he was to Saul as long as he could be!

Why do I say that? Because there is a condition like that existing today. Divine things have been taken hold of by men carnally, and brought down to an earth level; the direct government of the Holy Spirit has been exchanged for committees and boards and so on. Men have set up the government in Divine things and are running things for God. The way of the New Testament, that in prayer and fasting the mind of the Lord is secured, is hardly known. Well, those who are spiritual, who know, who see, who understand, cannot accept that. But they are very charitable. A true prophet, like Samuel, will be charitable as long as possible, until that wrong thing takes the pronounced and positive form of disobedience to light given. The Lord came to Saul through Samuel and gave him clearly to understand what he had to do. It was made known to him with unmistakable clearness what God required of him, and he was disobedient. Then Samuel said, 'No more charity with that!' He was implacable. "Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, he hath rejected thee from being king" (I Samuel 15:23). Samuel went as far as he could while the man did the best he could. That is charity.

Of course, types are always weak and imperfect, but you can see the truth there. The prophet Samuel showed a great deal of forbearance with things that were wrong, even while in his heart he could not accept them. He hoped that light would break and obedience follow and the situation be saved. We have to be very charitable to all that with which we do not agree.

The point is this - Moses had to learn that; he had to be made like that. We are better fitted to serve the Lord's purpose, we are truer prophets, when we can bear with things with which we do not agree, than when in our zeal we are iconoclasts, and seek only to destroy the offending thing. The Lord says, 'That will not do.'

In all that we have said we have emphasized only one thing - that prophetic ministry is a function. Its function is to hold everything in relation to God's full thought - but not as holding a 'line' of things, in an objective and legalistic way. You do not take something up. You can only do it truly as God has wrought into you that thing for which you are going to stand, and in so far as it has been revealed in you through experience, through the handling of God - God has taken you through it, and you know it like that. It is not that you have achieved something, but rather that you have been broken in the process. Now you are fit

for something in the Lord.

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