

## The Message of God's Severity—Strange to Western Ears

by David Orton

<http://lifemessenger.org/the-message-of-gods-severity-strange-to-western-ears/>

Western Christianity is an expert on the *goodness* of God. We sing and write about it. We preach it from our pulpits, broadcast it over the airwaves, and multiply it through every electronic means—as we should. But because we don't balance it by teaching the whole counsel of God—His goodness *and* severity—it becomes *self-serving* and breeds a *self-indulgent* religion governed by personal convenience and affluence. To talk about the *severity* of God is strange to our Western ears. And yet it was the message preached by the prophets. Couched in the language of love they warned of God's severity to those who worshiped other gods, foreshadowing their imminent captivity if they refused to turn back. They would be "*trodden under foot of men*" (Matthew 5:13 KJV). With neither fear nor favor, these prophets faithfully presented the severity of God to their generation. Even so, the people of God felt they were immune from disaster:

*They said, "He will do nothing! No harm will come to us; we will never see sword or famine."*

Jeremiah 5:12

Apart from Jeremiah and several other true prophets, the religious leaders of the day only confirmed the people in their feelings of invincibility and the sense that "it will never happen to us." For them it was business as usual:

*They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. "Peace, peace," they say, when there is no peace.*

Jeremiah 6:14

And yet the Lord warned them against these kinds of leaders:

*Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; **they fill you with false hopes. They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord.** ...**They say, "No harm will come to you."** But which of them has stood in the council of the Lord to see or hear his word? Who has listened and heard his word? ...I did not send these prophets, yet they have run with their message.... **But if they had stood in my council, they would have proclaimed my words to my people and would have turned them from their evil ways and from their evil deeds.***

Jeremiah 23:16-18,21-22

If the popular prophets of Jeremiah's day had "*stood in the council of the Lord,*" they would have warned of imminent judgment. In doing so, they would have turned the hearts of the people back to God.

*The Message and Ministry of the Prophet*

The true prophet is a "covenant mediator." This is seen in the word of the Lord through Jeremiah:

*Listen to the terms of this covenant and follow them...I warned them again and again, saying, "Obey me." But they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubbornness of their evil hearts. So I brought on them all the curses of the covenant I had commanded them to follow but that they did not keep...They have followed other gods to serve them. Both Israel and Judah have broken the covenant...Therefore "I will bring on them a disaster they cannot escape."*

Jeremiah 11:6-11

The prophetic spirit goes out in both old and new covenants to draw the hearts of the people back to covenant love—back to holiness and intimacy with God. When Jesus was asked which was the greatest commandment in the Law He answered from the *shema* of Deuteronomy 6:

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.*

Matthew 22:37-40

Both, the covenant (the Law) and the prophetic ministry (the Prophets) are fulfilled when the people of God return to the Lord with all their hearts. Contrary to what many may think, Jesus did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to actually fulfil them (see Matthew 5:17). The new covenant puts within us such a heart for God that the covenant, summed up in the greatest commandment, is finally fulfilled.

Consequently the function of a prophet in today's church has not substantially changed from that of his or her old covenant counterpart—to call the people of God back to covenant obedience and love. While their method of delivery may be original, their message is not. They give witness to the covenant and, more importantly, to the unchangeable character and nature of the covenant God. By restating in the power of the Spirit the terms of that covenant, including its sanctions (remedial judgments and blessings), they call the hearts of the people back to the embrace of God's holy love. John, a New Testament prophet, fearlessly fulfilled this ministry when he confronted the spiritual love life of the Ephesian church, calling them back from where they had fallen:

*You have forsaken your the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.*

Revelation 2:4-5

In calling them back to covenant love—to the *goodness* of God— John also sanctioned it with a remedial judgment—the *severity* of God:

*If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand.*

Revelation 2:5

Violating the covenant has consequences, even in the New Testament.

This prophetic call to return to covenant love is embedded in the covenant sanctions (remedial judgments) of Leviticus 26. After twenty-five verses of sanctions they culminate in the invitation to return to the Lord (see Leviticus 26:40-45). The sanctions are designed to be remedial—to bring us back to the Lord. Therefore the function of the prophet is not only to sound warnings of imminent judgment, but also to discern the hand of God in the judgments as they happen, interpreting accurately, in the light of the covenant, what God is doing and why. The love covenant, with its *stipulations* (commandments) and *sanctions* (blessings and curses), is the grid through which we interpret and come to understand the circumstances of God's people. It is a prophetic touchstone, the reference point for God's dealings with His people. Either blessing or cursing flow from this covenant of love, depending on whether God's holy nature has been honored or violated.

In the church today we have caricatured the prophet as a prognosticator, looking to them for personal words of direction or comfort and in some cases for warnings of natural disasters. In doing so we have missed the point, minimizing and domesticating the prophetic ministry. There is no question that personal prophecy and prediction are elements of the prophetic gifting. But the real weight of the prophet's calling is concentrated in the covenant. Through this touchstone they articulate God's ways with His people.

As God draws history to a conclusion, bringing all things together in Christ (see Ephesians 1:10), He will restore the prophetic ministry to truly biblical proportions where they will again stand in the council of the Lord (see Jeremiah 23:22). In a spirit of meekness, but with great power, they will rebuke not only the church, but also strong nations—their governments, kings, and presidents—calling them back to the ways of the Lord—back to covenant love. They will prophesy over the church and over cities and nations, changing their spiritual atmosphere, preparing the way of the Lord. Never before have we so desperately needed to hear from heaven. In these epochal days as God sets the stage for the greatest display of His glory in history, give us again men and women who are moved by a different spirit. Those who are more than conference celebrities and “anointed” entertainers, more than professional pastors and program promoters. Those who, coming out of the presence of God, are *seers* and *truth-tellers*, prophesying as covenant mediators and interpreters, drawing the church and the nations back to the heart of God.

*The Western Church: Under the Discipline of God*

Babylon is in the church—and it is falling! God is bringing it down—He is removing everything that can be shaken (see Hebrews 12:27). The Son of Man is sending out His angels to weed out of the kingdom everything that causes offence (see Matthew 25:41). Jesus, referring to the pharisaic religious system, declared:

*Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots.*

Matthew 15:13

The *spirit of pride and religion* that has been secure in the bosom of the church for centuries is in the process of being exposed and rooted out.

God’s *remedial judgments* are always incremental. The Lord is slow to anger and full of compassion. In His great mercy He sends His messengers, again and again, to call His people back to Himself before He sends His judgments—military defeats, economic recession, destructive weather patterns, disease, or plagues. Israel was cut off, as the final remedial judgment, only after years of prophetic pleading and escalating chastisements. But how far are we in this process? I submit that the West is much further down the path of remedial judgment than we want to admit.

The last one hundred years have already seen the Western nations experience the agonies of two world wars and a major depression. According to Gil Elliot in his book, *Twentieth-Century Book of the Dead*, allowing for population growth, the twentieth century by far was the deadliest century in the history of humankind through wars and government sponsored murder. Professor R.J. Rummel authoritatively confirms this in his book, *Death by Government*, where he shows that 169 million people were killed by government-sponsored mass murder in the twentieth century. Rummel subsequently revised his estimates upward to 262 million! This figure does not include military personnel killed in war!

The hour is far later than we have imagined. Our so-called enlightened age has been one of the darkest, and yet one of great renewal and reformation in the church. The Lord has not only been coming to us in seasons of judgment but also in mercy. Even so, if we miss the window of September 11 by refusing to discern the dealings of God and humble ourselves then we will be subjected to increasingly heavier chastisements.

We are still in a season of grace—God in His wrath remembers mercy. Now is the time to turn from our proud ways—from the works of our own hands—to humble our hearts and seek the Lord. Humility, repentance, and reconciliation are the only weapons that will roll back the judgments that are most certainly coming. Our deepening heart response to the call of covenant love will bring down, once and for all, the Babylonian principalities of pride and religion that have, for centuries, held the church in captivity.

Excerpt from [\*Snakes in the Temple: Unmasking Idolatry in Today's Church\*](#)

*Read or give as a gift:*

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