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MESSAGE 6

SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES AND MANIFESTATIONS OF SPIRITUAL POWER

In this message, we will consider scriptural examples of meaningful manifestations of spiritual power and the different ways God communicates with men. We will also examine the dangers involved when we experience what seems to be direct communication from God, including dreams and visions and voices claiming to be God speaking to us. And lastly, we will consider how we can guard ourselves against spiritual deception.

Meaningful manifestations of spiritual power

There is a place for manifestations of spiritual power of the more dramatic kind. I will consider two examples of such demonstration of spiritual power – one from the New Testament and the other from the Old Testament.

Peter healing the lame man

In Acts 3, the apostle Peter healed a lame man in the name of the Lord Jesus. When the people saw the miracle, they were amazed, and they fixed their gaze on Peter.

It would have been easy for someone in Peter's position to feel proud and self-important. But Peter did not revel in the limelight. He was conscious that it was the power of the Lord that had healed this man. He therefore drew the people's attention to the Lord, away from himself and the miracle. Peter preached the truth to the crowd and gave a powerful testimony of the Lord Jesus.

Acts 3:11-16

11 While he was clinging to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them at the so-called portico of Solomon, full of amazement.

12 But when Peter saw this, he replied to the people, "Men of Israel, why are you amazed at this, or why do you gaze at us, as if by our own power or piety we had made him walk?"

13 "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His servant Jesus, the one whom you delivered and disowned in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release Him.

14 "But you disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you,

15 but put to death the Prince of life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses.

16 "And on the basis of faith in His name, it is the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man whom you see and know; and the faith which comes through Him has given him this perfect health in the presence of you all.

This event had a great impact on the people. Acts 4:4 tells us that "many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand".

We see from this example that manifestations of God's power can take place in the context of effective and meaningful service with right motives and according to God's will.

Moses delivering Israel out of Egypt

In the Old Testament, we see many obvious manifestations of spiritual power that took place according to God's instructions. For example, God commanded Moses to deliver Israel out of Egypt, and through him, performed many signs and wonders. These signs and wonders were a demonstration of the power of God and for the fulfilment of His purposes. They were not meant to be viewed by others as a manifestation of the power of Moses.

It is helpful to note that God worked through Moses in this way after having trained and equipped him for the task. At the age of forty, Moses was not ready. He rashly killed an Egyptian and had to flee Egypt. For the next forty years, in the wilderness, God trained him. After the years of training, Moses was ready to be used by God to manifest His power for the fulfilment of His purposes.

Periods of obvious manifestations of God's power

God's power may be manifested in obvious forms or in forms that are not obvious, yet equally or more significant. It seems to me that during certain periods or phases in the outworking of His purposes, God manifests His power in more obvious forms. He does so for specific purposes. I will give three examples.

One such phase is Israel's deliverance from Egypt, their wandering in the wilderness, and their entry into Canaan. This is an important phase in the fulfilment of God's purposes. During this phase, God performed many miracles.

Another phase is during the times of Elijah and Elisha. Both prophets performed many signs and wonders. This could, in part, be because of the spiritual poverty and darkness of the times. God demonstrated His power in this way to help draw the people of Israel back to Himself. He wanted them to turn away from gross forms of idolatry and the worship of Baal. When Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal, he

performed miracles that demonstrated unmistakably the power of God so that the people of Israel might recognise who the true God is and come back to Him.

1 Kings 18:21–24

21 Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." But the people did not answer him a word.

22 Then Elijah said to the people, "I alone am left a prophet of the Lord, but Baal's prophets are 450 men.

23 "Now let them give us two oxen; and let them choose one ox for themselves and cut it up, and place it on the wood, but put no fire under it; and I will prepare the other ox and lay it on the wood, and I will not put a fire under it.

24 "Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the Lord, and the God who answers by fire, He is God." And all the people said, "That is a good idea."

1 Kings 18:36–40

36 At the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, Elijah the prophet came near and said, "O Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, today let it be known that You are God in Israel and that I am Your servant and I have done all these things at Your word.

37 "Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that You, O Lord, are God, and that You have turned their heart back again."

38 Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench.

39 When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, "The Lord, He is God; the Lord, He is God."

40 Then Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape." So they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon, and slew them there.

The inauguration phase of the New Covenant is another phase – a major phase. This phase stretched from the days of the earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus to the days of the early church. As He proclaimed the gospel and taught the mysteries of God's kingdom, the Lord Jesus healed lepers, made the lame walk, gave sight to the blind and cast out demons. God also imbued the apostles with spiritual powers to perform many signs and wonders.

Wholesome approach to obvious manifestations of God's power in our personal life

We should not long to experience the power of God in spectacular forms; neither should we be prejudiced against it. It is not for us to lay down the conditions on

which God should work in our lives. Sometimes He may work through our lives in spectacular ways in spite of the dangers involved.

The healthy approach is to concentrate on developing our inward qualities, and at the same time, be ready for the Lord to work through us as He sees fit. This would mean that we concentrate on equipping and preparing ourselves, such as by developing our attitudes and character, and growing in the knowledge of the Scriptures, of God and His ways. As we grow in spiritual health and maturity, we submit to God and allow Him to work in and through us as He deems best.

The danger of deception and the importance of positive inward qualities

When we seek spectacular spiritual experiences, we expose ourselves to many dangers, one of which is deception.

If we receive a "spiritual gift" which involves obvious manifestations of spiritual power, would we know whether it is from God or from the evil one? If it is a gift of God, would we know how and when to exercise it? Are we able to cope with the attention that others may shower on us? Would we be drawn towards seeking more spectacular spiritual experiences, resulting in our having an unwholesome sense of power and a false sense of spirituality? Such experiences in themselves do not make us truly strong or mature. What makes us truly strong or mature are the spiritual health and qualities of the inner being.

Let us look at Luke 10:17-20:

Luke 10:17-20

17 The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name."

18 And He said to them, "I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning.

19 "Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will injure you.

20 "Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven."

The Lord had sent the seventy out to proclaim His kingdom and to heal the sick. In verse 17, we are told they returned with joy, highlighting the fact that the demons were subjected to them in Jesus' name. In response, the Lord Jesus said: "I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning ... I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy". What the seventy had experienced was clearly a genuine experience of the power and authority of God.

But the Lord Jesus realised that the seventy were taken up with the fact that the demons were subject to them in His name. So He said to them: "Nevertheless do not

rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven”.

The critical issue is not the experience of God's power in itself. We should not be preoccupied with that. What counts is having our names recorded in heaven, which is a moral and spiritual issue. It involves true repentance and faith in Christ, and our relationship with God and with the brethren in His eternal kingdom. It means having a part in the outworking of God's purposes.

There is a place to rejoice in God's victory over the powers of darkness, but what the Lord Jesus wants us to concentrate on is being diligent and faithful, good stewards of what He has entrusted to us, and that would include the proper exercise of spiritual gifts. This is the thrust of the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30), and this is the way to be ready for His Second Coming.

God communicating directly with people in various ways

Miracles, tongues, healings and casting out of demons are not the only manifestations of the more obvious, dramatic spiritual experiences. There are also the more obvious, direct spiritual communications between God and man, for example, through visions and dreams. The Old Testament records many instances in which God spoke to and through the prophets in clear, precise details about what they were to do, say, and how things were to be done. God can still communicate with men in such clear, direct, spiritual ways today. But this is an area fraught with dangers.

I will now consider in greater detail this area of God communicating directly with people in various ways, and in Message 7, we will consider this proposition: *Although God may speak to us in clear and direct ways, most of the time He prefers to speak to us in less dramatic and less obvious ways, when it is feasible for Him to do so meaningfully.*

God speaking directly to people

The experiences of Cornelius and Peter

Acts 10 records the experiences of Cornelius and Peter. Cornelius was a Gentile. Acts 10:2 tells us that he was a devout man who feared God. He gave alms and prayed to God continually. He was not a mature believer at that time, yet God spoke to him clearly through an angel in a vision.

Acts 10:3-4

3 About the ninth hour of the day he clearly saw in a vision an angel of God who had just come in and said to him, “Cornelius!”

4 And fixing his gaze on him and being much alarmed, he said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God.

Here, we see the angel calling Cornelius by name and telling him that his "prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God". The angel then instructed Cornelius:

Acts 10:5-6

5 "Now dispatch some men to Joppa and send for a man named Simon, who is also called Peter;

6 he is staying with a tanner named Simon, whose house is by the sea."

In the meantime, the apostle Peter also had a spiritual experience. This is recorded in Acts 10:9-20.

Peter was praying on the housetop when he fell into a trance. He saw the sky opened up and an object like a great sheet descending. In the great sheet were four-footed animals, crawling creatures and birds. Peter then heard a voice asking him to kill and eat the animals. As Peter was reflecting on the vision, the Spirit instructed him on what he needed to do (vs. 19-20).

It is clear from this episode that God communicated directly to both Cornelius and Peter in a spiritual form.

The experience of Paul

In Acts 22, the apostle Paul testified about his conversion and the events that followed. As he was approaching Damascus around noontime, a very bright light suddenly flashed from heaven all around him. He then heard a voice that said to him: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" Paul asked: "Who are You, Lord?" The Lord answered: "I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting". Paul then asked the Lord Jesus: "What shall I do, Lord?" The Lord Jesus instructed: "Get up and go on into Damascus, and there you will be told of all that has been appointed for you to do" (vs. 6-10).

Paul narrates another incident in verses 17 to 21 in which the Lord again spoke to him clearly and directly. While praying in the temple, he fell into a trance. Then he heard the Lord saying to him: "Make haste, and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about Me" (v. 18). And while Paul was reasoning with the Lord, the Lord told him: "Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles" (v. 21).

These, then, are some examples of God speaking directly to people. But God also speaks in other ways.

God speaking through dreams

Another way that God communicates with people is through dreams.

Joseph's dreams

In Matthew 1:18-21, we are told that God communicated to Joseph in a dream. When Joseph found out that Mary, who was to become his wife, was with child before they came together, he considered ending his relationship with her. It was at this time that the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream:

Matthew 1:20-21

20 But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.

21 "She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."

Because Herod wanted to kill the Child Jesus, the angel of the Lord again spoke to Joseph in a dream after the magi had left:

Matthew 2:13

Now when they had gone, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up! Take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him."

After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in yet another dream to Joseph in Egypt, instructing him: "Get up, take the Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel; for those who sought the Child's life are dead" (Matt. 2:20). All these instructions were clearly communicated through dreams.

In an earlier verse, we are told the magi were warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod and they therefore departed for their own country by another way (Matt. 2:12).

Although God does speak to people through dreams, having God speaking to us through dreams does not mean that God is pleased with us or that we are spiritual. The Lord has His reasons for communicating in this way. It often involves the outworking and fulfilment of His purposes. Consider the dreams of Pharaoh and the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar.

Pharaoh's dreams

Pharaoh was not someone the Lord was particularly pleased with, but he had dreams that revealed the outworking and fulfilment of God's purposes.

Genesis 41 tells us Pharaoh dreamed of seven cows, sleek and fat, and seven cows, ugly and gaunt. The seven ugly and gaunt cows ate up the seven fat cows. Then he dreamed a second time. He saw seven ears of grain that were full, and seven ears that were thin. And the thin ears swallowed up the seven plump, full ears. No one could interpret his dreams except Joseph. When Pharaoh called for him, Joseph replied: "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favourable answer" (v. 16). Joseph made clear to Pharaoh that the answer and interpretation to the dreams would come from the Lord.

Joseph then interpreted the dreams to Pharaoh. He told Pharaoh that the two dreams carried the same message from God. There would be seven years of great abundance followed by seven years of famine. Egypt therefore had to prepare for the famine that lay ahead by storing up during the seven years of plenty. It was under these circumstances that Pharaoh appointed Joseph over the land of Egypt and made him second in command.

Out of jealousy, Joseph's brothers had earlier sold him to be a slave in Egypt. But Joseph saw a higher purpose and the hand of God in all that took place. He saw that God had sent him to Egypt to preserve a remnant in the earth, and to keep them alive by a great deliverance (Gen. 45:5-7). Joseph being in Egypt, Pharaoh's dreams and Joseph's interpretation, and the events that followed, were all key parts of the outworking and fulfilment of God's purposes.

Nebuchadnezzar's dreams

Let us now look at Nebuchadnezzar's dreams. In Daniel 2 we are told Nebuchadnezzar was troubled by his dreams. His magicians and sorcerers were not able to interpret them. God revealed the mystery of Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the great statue to Daniel in a night vision (v. 19) and Daniel made known the interpretation to Nebuchadnezzar. The fact that Nebuchadnezzar had this dream in no way indicates that God was pleased with him. In fact, the dream was not even primarily for his benefit but for a wider context and purpose. The whole scenario – the dream and its interpretation – was a broad sweep of what would be taking place in this world.

Nebuchadnezzar dreamed about a great statue, with a head of gold, breast and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, its feet partly of iron, partly of clay. A stone cut out without hands struck the statue at the feet of iron and clay and crushed them. The interpretation of the dream was that there would arise one empire after another, but these would be put to an end by the kingdom set up by God.

Daniel then interpreted the meaning of the stone cut out without hands striking and crushing the statue:

Daniel 2:44-45

44 "In the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever.

45 "Inasmuch as you saw that a stone was cut out of the mountain without hands and that it crushed the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold, the great God has made known to the king what will take place in the future; so the dream is true and its interpretation is trustworthy."

The message is that earthly empires would come to an end, but God would establish His kingdom which would endure forever.

Again, when God speaks to a person through dreams, it does not mean that God is pleased with him. God could be sending that person a severe warning. This was what happened to Nebuchadnezzar on another occasion.

One day, while lying on his bed, Nebuchadnezzar saw visions. He then saw an angel descending from heaven and bringing this message:

Daniel 4:14-16

14 "He shouted out and spoke as follows:

"Chop down the tree and cut off its branches,

Strip off its foliage and scatter its fruit;

Let the beasts flee from under it

And the birds from its branches.

15 "Yet leave the stump with its roots in the ground,

But with a band of iron and bronze around it

In the new grass of the field;

And let him be drenched with the dew of heaven,

And let him share with the beasts in the grass of the earth.

16 "Let his mind be changed from that of a man

And let a beast's mind be given to him,

And let seven periods of time pass over him.

Daniel interpreted the dream as a warning from God to King Nebuchadnezzar (vs. 20-23). The tree represented King Nebuchadnezzar. He was great and strong – from an earthly viewpoint – and he had become proud. Daniel explained the meaning of the dream and the divine decree and also gave Nebuchadnezzar good advice:

Daniel 4:25-27

25 that you be driven away from mankind and your dwelling place be with the beasts of the field, and you be given grass to eat like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven; and seven periods of time will pass over you, until you recognize that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind and bestows it on whomever He wishes.

26 'And in that it was commanded to leave the stump with the roots of the tree, your kingdom will be assured to you after you recognize that it is Heaven that rules.

27 'Therefore, O king, may my advice be pleasing to you: break away now from your sins by doing righteousness and from your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor, in case there may be a prolonging of your prosperity.'

Nebuchadnezzar failed to heed Daniel's advice and Daniel's interpretation of the dream was later fulfilled (vs. 28-37).

Years earlier, the Lord also sent a warning through a dream to Abimelech who had taken Sarah, Abraham's wife (Gen. 20). Unlike Nebuchadnezzar, Abimelech heeded God's warning and allowed Sarah to be reunited with Abraham.

These, then, are some examples of God speaking to people through dreams as part of the outworking of His plans and purposes.

God's direct words of instructions and prophecy

In the Old Testament, God often spoke clearly to the prophets, instructing them what to do and say. In many passages, the prophets introduced their prophecies by saying: "Thus says the Lord". And the words they uttered were direct words from the Lord. Let us look at some examples from the Book of Ezekiel.

In Ezekiel 1, Ezekiel testified that he saw visions of God. Among other things, he saw "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord" (v. 28). And when he saw it, he fell on his face and heard the Lord speaking to him. In the whole Book of Ezekiel, we see the Lord, on many occasions, speaking to the prophet clearly and directly. For example:

Ezekiel 2:1, 3, 7

1 Then He said to me, "Son of man, stand on your feet that I may speak with you!"

3 Then He said to me, "Son of man, I am sending you to the sons of Israel, to a rebellious people who have rebelled against Me; they and their fathers have transgressed against Me to this very day.

7 "But you shall speak My words to them whether they listen or not, for they are rebellious.

Ezekiel 3:1

Then He said to me, "Son of man, eat what you find; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel."

Ezekiel 3:17

"Son of man, I have appointed you a watchman to the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from My mouth, warn them from Me.

The instructions from the Lord to Ezekiel were very clear. The Lord told him what it meant to be a watchman and what would be required of him. In Ezekiel 4, the Lord instructed the prophet to portray the siege of Jerusalem. He was to get a brick and inscribe on it the city of Jerusalem and then to lay siege against the brick. He was to lie on his side, first on his left side, then on his right, and to lay the iniquity of the house of Israel and Judah on it, to bear the iniquity for the number of days he was to lie on it, corresponding to the years of their iniquity. Ezekiel obeyed accordingly.

God's instructions continued through Ezekiel 5 and 6. In the first three verses of Ezekiel 6, we read:

Ezekiel 6:1-3

1 And the word of the Lord came to me saying,
2 "Son of man, set your face toward the mountains of Israel, and prophesy against them
3 and say, 'Mountains of Israel, listen to the word of the Lord God! Thus says the Lord God to the mountains, the hills, the ravines and the valleys: "Behold, I Myself am going to bring a sword on you, and I will destroy your high places.

Ezekiel was to utter these exact words in prophecy. God again instructed Ezekiel, in chapter 12, concerning the portrayal of the exile of Israel. The Lord told him in verse 6: "I have set you as a sign to the house of Israel", and in verse 11: "Say, 'I am a sign to you. As I have done, so it will be done to them; they will go into exile, into captivity' ".

I will now refer to various examples where the phrase, "Thus says the Lord" occurs. Often what follows is a lengthy prophecy. They are not the words of the prophet, but those of the Lord. In those situations, the prophet was speaking exactly what God wanted him to communicate.

Ezekiel 13:3

'Thus says the Lord God, "Woe to the foolish prophets who are following their own spirit and have seen nothing.

Ezekiel 13:8

Therefore, thus says the Lord God, "Because you have spoken falsehood and seen a lie, therefore behold, I am against you," declares the Lord God.

Ezekiel 13:13, 18, 20

13 Therefore, thus says the Lord God, "I will make a violent wind break out in My wrath. There will also be in My anger a flooding rain and hailstones to consume it in wrath.

18 and say, 'Thus says the Lord God, "Woe to the women who sew magic bands on all wrists and make veils for the heads of persons of every stature to hunt down lives! Will you hunt down the lives of My people, but preserve the lives of others for yourselves?"

20 Therefore, thus says the Lord God, "Behold, I am against your magic bands by which you hunt lives there as birds and I will tear them from your arms; and I will let them go, even those lives whom you hunt as birds.

Ezekiel 14:4, 6

4 "Therefore speak to them and tell them, 'Thus says the Lord God, "Any man of the house of Israel who sets up his idols in his heart, puts right before his face the stumbling block of his iniquity, and then comes to the prophet, I the Lord will be brought to give him an answer in the matter in view of the multitude of his idols,

6 "Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'Thus says the Lord God, "Repent and turn away from your idols and turn your faces away from all your abominations.

Other examples of clear, direct instructions are God's detailed instructions to Moses on the construction of the tabernacle and the laws for Israel, and God's instructions to Samuel to anoint David as king. Such communication by God to His prophets was common in the Old Testament; it also occurred on various occasions in the New Testament.

God can still communicate in such clear and direct ways to man today. But this area has its dangers. A major problem is deception, which the evil one is a master of. Paul warns us against paying attention to deceitful spirits, who are out to cause the downfall of believers, especially in the last days (1 Tim. 4:1).

"Hearing voices" – dangers and safeguards

I want to elaborate on this issue of "hearing voices", the dangers involved, and how we may safeguard ourselves.

A person who hears a voice claiming to be God's can be in a dilemma, especially if the voice demands absolute and immediate obedience. If he does not pay heed, he

fears he would be disobeying the Lord. Yet if he does, he fears being deceived, as the voice may not be the Lord's.

Evil spirits can impersonate God in very convincing ways. A person may hear voices when having seemingly uplifting spiritual experiences. He may experience an unusual sense of joy and peace and feel a spiritual presence. He may see a bright light, or feel a sense of being special, or of being entrusted with a special mission.

He may initially receive instructions that seem reasonable and helpful. For example, he may be instructed to pray and read the Scriptures, and to be concerned for various people and issues. Later, he may be instructed to wake up at odd hours to read, to pray, and to urgently look into issues. The evil one may be doing all these to wear him out, reduce his alertness and the efficient use of his faculties, and to complicate his relationship with others.

The instructions may become more and more bizarre. But the person may continue to follow the instructions because he may be told that his faith is being tested and that he must trust and obey "God". As the deception grows, the evil one can then manipulate this person's life for his own purposes.

While manipulating the person, the evil one may hinder him from getting help from others. This is a key strategy of the evil one. The person may be told that he is undergoing special training, which he must not divulge. He may be told that he must learn to walk with "God" by faith and he must learn not to depend on man. The person finds that he does not have the freedom to share with others or explain his actions. When this happens, it is difficult to help him come out of the deception, and the deception gets more serious.

The end result is that the person enters into a relationship with the powers of darkness and comes under their bondage.

Safeguards against such deception

How then can we safeguard ourselves against such deception? This is a complex subject but there are four points we can bear in mind:

1. We should be very slow to follow instructions from such "voices" or to conclude that they are of the Lord until we have very clear basis for deciding and are very clear that they are indeed of the Lord. This approach also applies to dreams and visions.

When we are unclear of the source, we should not act in obedience to it, even when such instructions appear consistent with biblical truth, for example, instructions to read the Scriptures or to pray for others. If we consider it reasonable to pray or read the Scriptures at a certain time and for a particular length of time, we should act on the basis of these

objective grounds and not in obedience to the voice. This distinction is important. If we act in obedience to the voice and in reality the voice is from the forces of darkness, we would then be moving towards having a relationship with the source and could end up in spiritual bondage.

2. Our primary emphasis should be to develop purity of heart, to have a sound knowledge of God and the Scriptures, and be alert to the wiles of the evil one. Blots in our character, like wrong desires and negative attitudes, make us vulnerable. But if we maintain purity of heart, the evil one will have little room to work in us. If we know God and His ways, and have a good grasp of the Scriptures, we will be in a better position to distinguish what is of God and what is of the evil one. We will be more discerning when confronted with the works of the evil one, which are contrary to our knowledge of God and His ways. If we understand the wiles of the evil one and how he operates, we will not become easy prey.
3. When we are unclear whether it is the Lord speaking and do not act on the voice's instructions, we are not disobeying the Lord. We must not be threatened into obeying the voice, and we need not be afraid that we may be disobeying the Lord. God Himself has warned us against deceitful spirits. The Scriptures reveals Satan as a crafty, deceiving and scheming enemy. The apostle John tells us to test the spirits. So we are in fact obeying the Lord when we do not assume that any spiritual experience is of the Lord.
4. It is prudent to discuss our situation with those who can help us be clearer. The evil one wants to isolate us such that we cannot benefit from prayer support, fellowship, and the help of the brethren. But God has provided us the church. It is not His intention that we live in isolation, especially when dangers abound, when the danger of deception is very real. He wants us to seek Him together as His people, that the glory and truth of God can be manifested and the wiles of the evil one exposed. We should therefore share and discuss with those who love the Lord and who are in a position to help us.

Concluding remarks

It is important for us to distinguish between worldly concepts of strength and power and being truly strong in the Lord. In the area of spiritual power, we must distinguish between what is of God and what is of the evil one. We must not readily assume that manifestations of spiritual power are from the Lord.

The desire for spiritual power and the experience of it are not necessarily positive things. They can be damaging to our lives, and can result in serious bondage, especially if our motives are impure, and there are various negative traits or deficiencies in our lives. If we are not knowledgeable about the ways of the evil one

and how he deceives men, and if we are not careful in safeguarding ourselves from such deceptions, we can easily become his victims.

God can manifest His power in more obvious and spectacular ways like performing miracles and healings through people, even today. That is His sovereign prerogative. However, we should not be overly impressed and drawn towards such manifestations. We must also recognise that the person through whom various miracles and healings take place may not be truly strong.

An important point I want to put across in this message is that we should not be drawn to the more obvious manifestations of spiritual power. Although God can work in such ways, we must not harbour longings for these kinds of experiences. Do not equate them with spirituality or with being truly strong.

The other point I want to emphasise concerns our whole approach to life. What is it that we really long for? Is it in line with biblical emphasis and the heart of God?

We must set our hearts to grow in maturity and develop quality of life and character. If we do so, we will have wisdom and sound knowledge, and will be more ready for the Lord's use. If we do not, we become vulnerable to the evil one, especially when we seek spiritual experiences. We need to exercise great care in this area because once the evil one succeeds in influencing and deceiving us, our lives and the Lord's work can suffer serious setbacks. It may be difficult for us to free ourselves from such deception and spiritual bondage.

Let us examine our own lives. Do we long for obvious or dramatic spiritual experiences that may give us a sense of spirituality and power?

Let us ask the Spirit of God to search our hearts and show us our deficiencies. And when He does so, let us repent and take corrective steps, so that we may grow well in the Lord, and not be susceptible to the working of the evil one. Let us long to be truly strong in the Lord.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. The Scriptures records many instances in which God is pleased to manifest His power through men in the context of effective service. What are some of these instances? Share what you can learn from the way God worked in those situations.
2. Seeking experiences of obvious manifestations of spiritual power has its dangers. What then would be a wholesome approach to the issue of obvious manifestations of God's power in our personal lives?

3. Give some examples from the Scriptures of the various ways in which God communicated directly with people. When God communicates directly with a person, is that an indication that God is pleased with that person?
4. What are the dangers of paying heed to instructions from voices claiming to be God speaking to us? How can we guard ourselves from being deceived?

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