

Valley Bible Church - Bible Survey

Bible Survey Lesson 41: Introduction to the Prophets

INTRODUCTION: BOOKS OF THE PROPHETS

As we studied the books of history, I'm sure you noticed the dominant role prophets played in many of those events. It is not surprising that their words and works are recorded for us in detail in other books.

Priests who appeared in Israel *were generally welcomed*.

The job of a priest was to talk to God for the people. He was the one who lead them in acts of sacrifice (get right) and worship (stay right) to God.

Prophets who appeared, however, *were not popular*.

The job of a prophet was to talk to the people for God. Foretelling the future was only a very small part of his job. He was the one who confronted them, led them in acts of confession (admitting sin) and repentance (turning from sin).

A prophet's appearance meant there was apostasy and rebellion in Israel. His job was to raise his voice in protest against idolatry and corruption, calling the nation back to God.

BAD NEWS IS NEVER POPULAR!

Since his message was sometimes considered subversive to the nation, the prophet was considered a traitor and he was often persecuted, treated harshly, violently, or even killed.

II Kings 17:13 demonstrates the position, authority, and message of the prophet:

"Yet the Lord warned Israel and Judah, through all His prophets and every seer, saying, 'Turn from your evil ways and keep My commandments, My statutes according to the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you through My servants, the prophets.'"

So a prophet was primarily a servant of God, sent to warn the people of God, to turn back to God, and to keep the law of God.

The reason I said, primarily, is because three prophets spoke to gentile or pagan nations: Obadiah to Edom; Jonah and Nahum to Nineveh.

Prophet Profile

God's prophets were called to be His spokes men.

Their message was mainly a call to the nation for a return to their covenant relationship with God, either the conditional covenants (obey and I will bless, disobey and I will curse), or the unconditional covenants (I will make you a great nation with a land of your own ruled by one from the line of David, the Messiah, King of Kings).

God communicated His message to them.

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They were told what to do and what to say and were allowed to see, and sometimes to even understand, God's plans for his people.

God used very human individuals.

At their best the prophets were:

Courageous-- Samuel challenged Saul, Nathan confronted David Honest--they told the truth in the face of hostile a nation

Moral--Amos called for justice to, "*roll like a river*" and

Micah said the Lord required them, "*too act justly and love mercy and walk humbly with their God.*"

Compassionate--Amos announced judgment on Israel for taking advantage of the poor.

At their worst the prophets were:

Afraid--Elijah was afraid of Jezebel, depressed and felt alone.

Faithless--Jeremiah felt that God had deceived him and brought insults, abuse, and reproach to him.

Vindictive--Jonah really didn't want to see Nineveh spared.

God worked in various ways.

The Hebrew designations give to the prophets help us define their job.:

Seer--One able to see hidden truth, lost objects, the future.

Man of God--A traveling preacher with message often confirmed by signs and wonders.

Prophet--A spokesman (Aaron for Moses) for God.

God chose a diverse group.

The prophets came from many different backgrounds:

City boys--Isaiah

Royalty--Hezekiah

Country boys--Micah

Bureaucrats--Samuel, Nathan, Isaiah

Background

The period of the history of Israel known as "**the period of the prophets**" was extensive. It lasted from the kingdom of Ahab in Israel (Elijah) in the ninth century B. C., to the reign of Artaxerxes I in Persia (Nehemiah and Malachi) in the fourth century B. C. After that, the prophetic silence lasted until John the Baptist arrived on the scene in Jerusalem.

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There were occasionally prophets before this time, like Samuel and Nathan, but the prophet became the norm as God's authoritative voice during this historic period. They dominated the scene, dictating to kings, preaching to the people, and stating what was, "the will of God," and proclaiming, "thus says the Lord."

The political and religious conditions of their times dictated the message of the prophets, so they need to be studied in context of place and time. We will try to do that as we go from prophet to prophet, especially since we are not going chronologically, but in book order. In order to aid your study, I have a good chart that you will want to keep handy, that will help you keep the nations, kings, and prophets straight.

REFER TO PARALLEL CHART OF THE PROPHETS

Under Moses and throughout the period of the Judges, the Hebrew nation was a pure Theocracy. *God was actually the King.* Israel was meant to be a unique nation living among the many, illustrating what it was like to have the Creator God of Gods as your King of Kings.

When the people cried for a king and turned their Theocracy into a Monarchy, God told Samuel, ". . . *they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, from being King over them.*" II Samuel 8:7

But, even though the people had rejected God as their king, He did not abdicate His throne entirely. The prophets are proof that God was still the King of Kings. It was through the prophets, not the kings, nor the priests that God still spoke to His people.

Preview of Prophecy

As we do a brief thumb nail sketch of each book, you may want to list them in your notes, since we will look at them now in chronological order:

JOEL saw Judah as a nation under their rightful king, God. His message proclaimed "the day of the Lord."

JONAH is a prophetic story teaching that God desires to include Ninevah, a heathen nation, into His kingdom if they will forsake their sin and follow Him. Using Jonah, Israel is taught a lesson about God's mercy and their own bigotry.

AMOS was in tune with the people of both Israel and Judah and His message was one of need for their national accountability to God and separation from surrounding heathen nations.

HOSEA through his own experience and broken heart revealed the sin of spiritual infidelity and adultery in Israel.

MICAH commented on the false rulers who were in authority in Judah by contrasting them to the true and righteous rulers.

ISAIAH was truly a theocratic prophet. He declared that judgment must fall on the nation that fails to fulfil its God ordained mission in the world. He, however, pointed to a day of victory under a Servant Messiah that would, through personal suffering, bring ultimate triumph.

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NAHUM was a follow-up for the ministry of Jonah one hundred years later. Ninevah, which was spared because of the repentance brought by Jonah's teaching, was now returning from its own captivity and needed a warning and encouragement of its own.

ZEPHANIAH knew God intimately and declared that not only justice and punishment but also grace and mercy were attributes of God.

HABAKKUK gave an account of his own personal faith as he delivered God's message. He himself was puzzled by the circumstances of his time, but he found and proclaimed a great solution for the nation.

JEREMIAH was God's voice in the midst of darkness and disaster. He delivered his message of punishment and promise through great personal suffering and was totally rejected by the people. He was, humanly speaking, a failure, but he was faithful and therefore a spiritual success. He also wrote the Lamentations, in which he poured out his heart over the sin and suffering of his nation as one sympathizing with a best friend.

OBADIAH was concerned with the hostile attitude of the Edom toward Israel, and confronted that attitude in the name of the Lord.

EZEKIEL bore testimony to the glory of God in the dark days of exile. His was an especially hard message because he spoke of restoration of the nation when they were in bondage and their deepest apostasy.

DANIEL was also a prophet of hope in the dark years of exile. Like all the "major- prophets" he teaches the sovereignty of God, the failure and judgment of the people and the great and glorious future of victory yet to come.

HAGGAI understood and taught that a right relationship to God was the secret to national strength. He lobbied for the rebuilding of the temple.

ZECCARIAAH worked in concert with Haggai and became the foremost prophet in all of Jewish history in the area of eschatology (last things).

MALACHI condemned the corruption of living lives of form without substance. He ends with predictions of the Messiah, "the One to come."

The Prophetic Message

The ministry of the prophets was two fold:

1. Immediate: God's conditional covenant.

Temporal and spiritual blessings to the faithful, temporal and spiritual judgment for the unfaithful, and grace and mercy to the repentant.

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2. Future: *God's unconditional covenant,*

A day of righteous judgment is coming for the nation that will prepare it for the coming Messianic Kingdom. Jews will be re gathered and purified through tribulation, and this remnant nation will be the seed of the New Kingdom of the Messiah covering the entire earth.

There are three applications of an Old Testament prophetic message:

1.Historic: *The application to Israel in that specific time and place.*

It is interesting and important to us as history and as example of God's nature, especially how He shows mercy in dealing with people. But, there was a specific message directed to them and to them only.

2.Prophetic: *The predicting of future events/*

These predictions are interesting as we observe those that have been fulfilled and those yet to happen. Only a few apply to us today.

3. Universal: *The stating of truth and principles that never change.*

These are more than interesting. They are necessary and binding. As we study we need to watch for the life principles that apply to us.

Bonus of Prophecy

Along with accuracy, honesty, and integrity, prophecy stands as one of the reasons we believe the Bible is not only trustworthy, but supernatural. If you are interested in the use of prophecy to validate Scripture, there are a number of books on that subject, including *Evidence That Demands A Verdict*, by Josh McDowell, which has an entire chapter on the probabilities of prophecies coming true, especially focusing on Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

Conclusion

As it was when we followed the Hebrew children through the wilderness, it is easy to point to them and say, "What foolish, even stupid people they were. Couldn't they see what God was trying to do for them? Couldn't they learn even one small lesson? Couldn't they yield to the creator of the universe?" But, we're no different. Humanity has not changed. The message of the prophets are messages we still need to hear.

Statesmen and politicians still need to hear.

Religious leaders and lay people still need to hear.

Righteous and heathen still need to hear.

We still need to hear!

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What was that message again?

Leave your rebellious wandering.

Put aside your idols.

Confess and repent of your sins.

Make God the king of your life.

Do the prophets have anything to say to us in the New Testament age? *"Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins."* Acts 10:43

Homework:

Read: Or continue to read The Book of Isaiah

Think: How do I handle the message of the renewed Israel?

Apply: Spend this week thanking God for extending His plan to we gentiles.