

Ancient Prophets, Modern Messages

How the Old Testament Prophets comfort and challenge us today

Your Notes

What comes to mind when you think of the Old Testament prophets?

- When people think of prophets in the Old Testament, they often think of them prophesying about the birth of Jesus.
- That then results in a list of prophecies fulfilled by Jesus in the New Testament.
- That can be helpful and encouraging to our faith.
- However, less than 2 percent of Old Testament prophecy is messianic, about the coming of Jesus.

Or they think of the prophets as talking primarily about the end of the world, final judgment

- Fire and brimstone prophecies, end-times events that some try to correlate with contemporary events.
- But less than 1 percent of the content of prophetic books concerns events yet to come in a far future time.
- ***The majority of the content of the prophets concerns what will happen in the near future of the audience they were writing to.***
- They were addressing a contemporary audience reminding them of God's expectations and warning them of what would happen in the NEAR future, if they didn't do what God wanted.
- We'll get into that in a few minutes, but first, it's helpful to define....

A useful verse to keep in mind as we study them and perhaps hear or read something we think is about the end-times

- *"Do not call conspiracy
everything this people calls a conspiracy;
do not fear what they fear,
and do not dread it.
The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy,
he is the one you are to fear,
he is the one you are to dread. Isa.8:12-12*
- Only God, or Lord Almighty is to be feared and with him we are totally and forever secure.
- So, if the prophets are not primarily about prophecies about Jesus or end-times warnings, what are they about?
- First a definition:

What is a prophet? What does it mean to prophesy?

- The basic definition of a **prophet** is "one who speaks for God."
- To **prophesy** means to share that message, writing or speaking it.
- The **prophecy** is the resulting message.
- Again, though we often equate prophecy with talking about future events, that is only part of it's meaning.
- More than that, their message consisted of explaining God's laws and reminding people of their responsibility to obey them, rebuking and calling people back to God.
- One way to say this is that prophecy is more "forth-telling" than "fore-telling."

According to Stuart and Fee, in their excellent book on Biblical genre (the types of writing in the Bible and that affects our understanding of it)

- *They say that the prophets were “covenant enforcement mediators”*
- *Israel’s law constituted a covenant between God and his people—it was given first in Exodus immediately after they left Egypt.*
- *The Law contained not only regulations and statutes for them to keep but the sorts of punishments (“curses”) that God will necessarily mete out if they do not.*
- *God does not merely give Israel his law, but he enforces it. This is the message of the Prophets.*

Let’s look at what they promised and when they did it

- **Exodus 19** Exactly two months after the Israelites left Egypt, they arrived in the wilderness of Sinai. . . .
- ³Then Moses climbed the mountain to appear before God. The Lord called to him from the mountain and said, “Give these instructions to the family of Jacob; announce it to the descendants of Israel: ⁴‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians. You know how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. ⁵Now if you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my own special treasure from among all the peoples on earth; for all the earth belongs to me. ⁶And you will be my kingdom of priests, my holy nation.’ This is the message you must give to the people of Israel.”
- ⁷So Moses returned from the mountain and called together the elders of the people and told them everything the Lord had commanded him. ⁸And all the people responded together, **“We will do everything the Lord has commanded.”** So Moses brought the people’s answer back to the Lord.

And God later spells out exactly what would happen if they disobey

- *Early on after leaving Egypt: Lev. 26:14 “However, if you do not listen to me or obey all these commands, ¹⁵and if you break my covenant by rejecting my decrees, treating my regulations with contempt, and refusing to obey my commands, ¹⁶I will punish you.*
- *After 40 years of wandering for disobedience, He reminds them in Deut. 4: 26, “Today I call on heaven and earth as witnesses against you. If you break my covenant, you will quickly disappear from the land you are crossing the Jordan to occupy.”*
- **After listing the curses and blessings, in Moses’ final sermon, he ends with—**
- **Deut. 30:19 “Therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live.”**

The important timing of their promise and God’s warnings

- At the very start of Israel becoming a nation, they PROMISED to serve God, to keep His commands.
- At the same time, they were clearly told what would happen if they disobeyed.
- Many of the rest of the Old Testament events are the result of whether they do or not.
- God does not act in an arbitrary, cruel way in how He treats His people, on the contrary, you will see incredible care and patience as He sent prophets again and again before bringing judgment.

Contemporary application

- God expects a certain behavior from His people.
- When we become Christians, we are expected to know what that means—the Bible spells it out and the commands are not outdated.
- There are consequences to disobedience, and these are not only for rewards or punishment after we die.
- In some circles there is a belief today that because Jesus died for our sins, past, present and future (and He did),
- That we can live how we want to live, do whatever we want to do—all without consequences.

A huge error

- The children of Israel thought the same thing—that just because they were God’s redeemed people (from Egypt), just because they gave Him token worship,
- They could live however they wanted to live.
- These books show how wrong that idea is and how God held them accountable for their disobedience.
- We can learn from them because God’s expectations of his chosen people don’t change.
- ***This doesn’t mean immediate punishment or blessings, but it does mean we need to take it seriously if we choose to follow God, to be His people because.....

We are now His chosen representatives

- *2 Peter 2: 9, LB, You have been chosen by God himself—you are priests of the King, you are holy and pure, you are God’s very own—all this so that you may show to others how God called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were less than nothing; now you are God’s own. Once you knew very little of God’s kindness; now your very lives have been changed by it.*
- *¹¹ Dear brothers, you are only visitors here. Since your real home is in heaven, I beg you to keep away from the evil pleasures of this world; they are not for you, for they fight against your very souls.*
- **Astounding as that is, yes, it means us—representatives of our Lord and we want to be good ones!**

Application to us, to pay attention as we begin this study

- The Message Translation of 1 Cor 10:11-12 is quite blunt in its application to us of the lessons of the Old Testament.
- *These are all warning markers—danger!—in our history books, written down so that we don’t repeat their mistakes. Our positions in the story are parallel—they at the beginning, we at the end—and we are just as capable of messing it up as they were. Don’t be so naive and self-confident. You’re not exempt. You could fall flat on your face as easily as anyone else. Forget about self-confidence; it’s useless. Cultivate God-confidence.*

How these books help us please God

- God doesn’t change.
- He expects a holy, a set-apart behavior from the people called to represent Him on earth.
- If His people do not act the way they are supposed to act,

- There will be discipline, as Hebrews 12 tells us that God will discipline us if we disobey, like a father who loves his children and wants them to grow up properly.
- We don't immediately expect lightening to strike, but we may spend time wandering around in circles (as they did for 40 years) if we ignore God's Word to us.
- And so, we will study these prophets and learn from them to better represent our God.
- Here's how we'll do it.....

We won't read all of them

- ***See overall chart for how they fit in, but we will cover—***
- Week One: Introduction, Historical Setting, how to understand Prophetic writings
- Week Two: Jonah, about so much more than a fish
- Week Three: Amos, an unlikely prophet of justice
- Week Four: Hosea, when God uses your life as a lesson
- Week Five: Habakkuk, it's ok to challenge God and ask why
- Week Six: Ezekiel and Daniel, whiner, worker, witness, or wonder
- Week Seven: Haggai and Zechariah, God never forgets dreams or promises

How they fit into the Old Testament

In our Bibles the prophets aren't in historical order

- Nor are they in a context where you can see what was going on that prompted the prophet's message.
 - The Prophets are all placed behind the historical and poetic books in your Bible and in this order we have—
 - 5 Major Books (2 written by Jeremiah), called that because of length, not importance
 - Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Lamentations
 - 12 Minor Prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi
 - They are placed according to their genre—or the type of book they are. They aren't even in historical order in the genre section they are in (Jonah is the first in historical order).
 - Because of that you have no sense of the historical setting in which they took place.
 - It would be like.....

Imagine 2-4 thousand years from now

- The same time from the writing of the Old and New Testaments from now reading a book about the 20th century that was organized like this:
- In the first part of the book about the 20th century, you'd have a retelling of the events that took place, such as the history of the Great Depression, World War Two, and the Civil Rights movement.
- Next in the book you'd have chapters quoting poetry, philosophy, and romance stories of the times.
- Finally, at the end of the book, would be famous speeches of the times, but they wouldn't be in historical order, nor would you know where they were given.
- There would be a speech by a man called Churchill telling people to never

give up (from what we aren't sure), a speech by an FDR on only "fearing fear itself," and finally one from a preacher named Martin Luther King about a dream he had.

- How well would you know or understand the 20th century if you read about it in that way? How much sense would the speeches make if you couldn't place them with the history that produced them?

That's what happens when most people read the Bible today

- It's no wonder no one pays attention to the power and purpose of the Old Testament prophets when their words are divorced from the current events that prompted them.
- But when you read them in context and understand the current history when they spoke, they become alive in the same way it does when you understand why Martin Luther King stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial before a quarter of a million people. You understand the tension and terror it was to be a black person during that time and what it meant to hear him say, "I have a dream. . . ."

The order of books isn't the only challenge on dating

- Some contemporary commentators cast doubt *without supporting evidence* on the dating of the prophet's writing, based on an anti-supernaturalist bias. They attempt to date all much later, after prophesied events take place.
- ***But internal Biblical evidence, archeology, source criticism, and much current scholarship show validity of traditional dating.***
- We will discuss this issue more with individual books.
- The chart has the most Biblically accurate dates (though perhaps not exact, though close on all).
- Correct dates are important because they show how God, the author outside of time, can precisely predict future events.
- ***God is able to give specific names and details hundreds of years in advance, e.g. Cyrus, named by Isaiah (c.44-45) around a 100 years before he was born.***
- This is one of the most powerful proofs of the divine uniqueness of Christian scripture—again, we'll go into the details of each book as we go along—but it's important to understand this as an issue as we start.

Back to more now about the Prophets overall—Their audience

- Though they spoke primarily to Israel and Judah, as covenant enforcers,
- They also often spoke to the nations because ***all are accountable to God.***
- In addition, some spoke specifically for how they treated Israel, usually as a final judgement.
- For example—Obadiah to Edom, because of mistreating Israel, not acting as the brothers they were.
- Nahum to Nineveh, when they slipped back into sin after the revival under Jonah, now time for total destruction.

The authority of the Prophet

- They did not claim personal authority; they came from a variety of backgrounds, farmers, priest, royalty, some backgrounds we know nothing about.
- All emphasized that the message was not their own— the message came ***through*** them, they didn't make it up.

- They knew they spoke the words of God.
- Often used the repeated phrase “the Word of the Lord.”
- As is often the case, some reluctant, some hesitant, but like Jeremiah, the message burned in them, and they were compelled to speak.

****Their message wasn't all negative**

- ***But you'll only see it when you read the books completely, and not by pulling out random passages!***
- Always a message of hope if repentance and ultimately unconditional restoration promised after judgment.
- In these books we see the heart of God.
- We see God's patience—warnings repeated—sometimes for hundreds of years.
- We see His LOVE—no matter how badly He is treated—as we'll see in Hosea.
- We'll His desire for restoration, harsh judgment NEVER God's first choice—that's why he sent the prophets to each generation that disobeyed and He did it again and again.
- He doesn't sent prophets to beat up on people but to restore them, to set them right so He can bless them.

As you read single and repeated messages, you need to understand the prophetic perspective of time

- **Can be difficult to understand because the prophetic books frequently deal with 2 timelines, a near and a far....**
- **This can be challenging as Gordon and Fee describe it:**
- *“It should be noted, of course, that some of the prophecies of the near future were set against the background of the great eschatological [end-times] future, and sometimes they seem to blend. . . .*
- *It is like looking at two discs, with a smaller one in front of a larger, straight on; then from the perspective of subsequent history to see them from a side view and thus see how much distance there is between them.”*
- Fee, Gordon D.; Fee, Gordon D.; Stuart, Douglas; Stuart, Douglas (2014-06-24). How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: Fourth Edition (p. 207). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

Another illustration

- Of the prophetic view of world history. . . .
- If you look at a set of mountain ranges from a straight-on view they look very close together.
- This can be the same in events talked about in the prophets.

Shift the perspective slightly

- From an aerial view—
- And you can see there are large valleys between them.
- Since God sees all of time; when the prophets speak for God, it can sometimes be a bit confusing to know what is supposed to happen when.
- Or what might happen as a foretaste and then the final event much later.

An example of both timelines

- Valley of Dry Bones coming to life in Ezekiel 37.
- Near fulfillment: Israel did come together and return to the land (Ezra 1,2) in the lifetime of the prophet.
- Another fulfillment looks ahead to the end of time, of the eternal resurrection of all people.

- You see this expansive view of time, here and now, especially in Isaiah.

Overall, a key Lesson of the Prophets: Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy

- *“Orthodoxy is correct belief. Orthopraxy is correct living.*
- *Through the prophets, God called the people of ancient Israel and Judah to a balance of right belief and right living.*
- *This, of course, remains the very balance that the new covenant requires as well (cf. Eph 2: 8 – 10; James 1: 27; 2: 18).*
- *What God wanted from Israel and Judah is in a general sense the same as what he wants from us. The Prophetic Books can serve constantly as reminders to us of God’s determination to enforce his covenant.*
- *For those who obey the stipulations of the new covenant (loving God and loving one’s neighbor), the final, eternal result will be blessing (no matter what the troubles of this world).*
- *For those who disobey, the only result is an eternal curse, removal not just from the land, but the presence of God.”*

Fee, Gordon D.; Fee, Gordon D.; Stuart, Douglas; Stuart, Douglas (2014-06-24). How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: Fourth Edition (p. 211). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

Keeping that in mind

- My prayer is that as we start on this adventure of going through the prophets in their historical settings, that we look at them with contemporary applications in mind,
- Not only the political or socially important areas,
- But that always our orthopraxy, the lessons we learn, become personal to us and like the prophet Isaiah responded when he has a vision with God, and said “Here am I—send me.”
- To wherever, and in whatever way He chooses as we keep in mind, the foundational lesson of the prophets.....

That our GOD SPEAKS

- In the Beginning, He spoke all of creation into being.
- Upon the creation of humanity, God walked and talked personally with His creation in the Garden.
- But His creation turned away.
- In the intervening years, He was always available, and some took advantage of it—Job, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses and certainly multitudes of unnamed others carried on an intimate, face-to-face conversation with God.
- But most people didn’t. And so, He sent the prophets, gave us His Word, and ultimately came to earth in the touchable, laughing, challenging, and ultimately sacrificial person of Jesus.

We have all of that and we can and should learn from it but remember....

- *He’s never stopped speaking.*
- He speaks through gifted pastors, His Word, books that help us see Him.
- We can interact personally with our Lord in prayer and study and waiting quietly for Him to speak, because He will.
- But even as we study and pray, remember the ultimate promise of the prophets is that one day, as Rev. 21: 3 promises:
- *“Look, God’s home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them.”*
- The glass will no longer be dark; the veil will be removed; and we can walk and talk with our Lord and God; Savior and Friend, face-to-face, forever.

Go to www.Bible805.com for links to many more Bible related resources