

“Survey of the Scriptures”

Session #6 – THE PROPHETICAL BOOKS

Included with the books of law, history and poetry of the Bible may be found many prophetic books, in fact more than one third of the Old Testament books are writings of the prophets. We see then that they make up an important part of the Word of God.

The prophets of Bible times were *God's* representatives to man, whereas the priests were *man's* representatives to God. The prophet was inspired by God to speak in God's name. He was a man with a message.

What was his message? The message of the prophet, for his generation and for every generation to follow, contained both instruction and warning of judgment if the instructions were disobeyed. By God's revelation the prophet also foretold future events. His ministry was telling forth God's truth concerning the present and the future.

Whether he was a statesman like Isaiah or a herdsman like Amos, every prophet was chosen by God for his special work. When kings turned from God to worship idols, when priests made temple services empty and meaningless, God used the prophets as His official spokesmen to the Hebrew nation.

The division of the nation into two separate kingdoms, Israel to the north and Judah to the south, ushered in the times of the prophets.

Though the face and personality of the prophet might change, God's message did not. All the prophets told of man's sin, God's righteousness and coming judgment. They cried for repentance and turning from idols to worship the living God.

The prophets carried on their ministry in three distinct eras of Jewish history. They began long before the exile when the kingdoms were outwardly flourishing but inwardly corrupt. During the exile, they prophesied to the Hebrews who had been carried away into captivity. They continued their work after the exile when the people had returned to their native land.

Some scholars place **Jonah** among the earliest prophets; his message was to the Assyrians in Nineveh. Amos and Hosea were prophets to the northern kingdom of Israel before the time of exile.

When Jonah sounded warning of God's judgment on Nineveh the people repented and were spared. This was a disappointment to Jonah. As prophet and God's messenger, he knew God was merciful and just, but Jonah – the man – hoped to see these enemies of Israel wiped out. Although the book of Jonah is chiefly a story of the prophet's own life, it also shows God's concern for all people regardless of race or nationality.

Amos was one of the most colorful prophets of Old Testament times. A herdsman and farmer from the Tekoan hills, he was chosen by God to prophesy against the wealthy Israelite kingdom of Jeroboam the second.

In the market place Amos lifted his voice against slave trade, false weights and measures, cruelty to the poor. In God's name he cried out for justice and righteousness. He warned the people to prepare to meet their God.

Soon Assyrian military power began to threaten the land of Israel, and God sent Hosea to warn his countrymen of impending danger and plead with them to return to God. But the people would not listen.

Hosea was merciful and forgiving toward a wife who was unfaithful to him, and his family life was an analogy of the relationship between Israel and Jehovah. God would be merciful and forgiving to the faithless nation if the people would but return to Him in repentance.

When Israel was invaded by Assyrian armies the people of the northern kingdom were taken away into exile. The prophet's words of warning were fulfilled.

There were more prophets in Judah because the southern kingdom lasted 150 years longer than Israel. The earliest prophet was probably Joel. Isaiah and Micah were contemporaries of Israel's Amos and Hosea. Zephaniah, Jeremiah and Habakkuk were prophets of Judah's last days. Although they lived in Judah, Obadiah and Nahum prophesied against neighboring nations.

God used a plague of locusts and the resulting famine as a picture to **Joel** of the day of the Lord's judgment upon the nation. Joel called the people to repentance and prayer. He said that only in returning to the Lord would the nation be restored to a place of spiritual and temporal blessing.

Obadiah's prophecy was directed against Edom, descendants of Esau who lived in the mountainous region to the south of Judah. He proclaimed God's judgment upon them because of their violent and unbrotherly treatment of God's people. Little is known about Obadiah and the time of his message is uncertain.

Next we come to the prince among prophets – **Isaiah**. He made his home at court and became a great statesman. As adviser to several kings, Hezekiah among them, he guided the nation through times of political and moral crisis. His brilliant writings brought God's message of consolation and hope.

In theme and style, many chapters in the book of Isaiah resemble the New Testament, and the words of Isaiah are frequently quoted by New Testament writers. Isaiah's main theme is God's salvation.

The Good News of Isaiah is a book filled with prophetic pictures of the Messiah – His life, death, and coming glory. We see Christ as the Shepherd, the Light, the Lamb, just as He is shown to us in the Gospel of John.

Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah, lived on the highway just south of Jerusalem, and he showed an amazing knowledge of the social abuses and civic corruption in the capital city. As champion of the poor, he cried out against unscrupulous officials who oppressed farmers. It has been said the pinched peasant faces peer from between his words!

“What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” This was the cry of Micah. His message suits mankind in any age, of every generation. God requires obedience, justice and humility.

One hundred fifty years after Jonah, the prophet **Nahum** denounced the Assyrians and their great city of Nineveh, and this time judgment was inevitable. Through His prophet God made it clear that He must deal with sin. Nahum’s message to Nineveh may be summed up in a few words: You reap whatever you sow.

History has brought us to the last 50 years of Judah, when **Zephaniah** foretold a gloomy future of distress and desolation. Reforms under King Josiah were superficial, and the day of the Lord’s judgment was fast approaching. Zephaniah urged the people to repent and turn from their idols to serve God.

The saddest story in the prophetic books is that of **Jeremiah**, who endured a life of persecution as Judah’s kings and rulers rejected him and his divine message. Jeremiah prophesied against a dark background of history during the closing days of Judah. He saw thrones topple and kings taken captive.

Jeremiah was a tragic and suffering figure, always misunderstood and disbelieved. But he never wavered; he was always faithful to God’s truth. Through words of doom for his beloved city there shone a ray of hope in God’s promise of restoration.

Jeremiah used many object lessons to get his points across. He likened God to a potter and the Hebrew nation to clay, never doubting that God would one day perfect the nation which was marred by sin, just as the potter remade a marred vessel.

Jeremiah’s lament over the destruction of Jerusalem may be read in the book of **Lamentations**. His poem of grief is written in acrostic form.

Habakkuk wrote as a watchman on the walls of Jerusalem. It was the eve of Judah’s captivity and the prophet was probably eyewitness to the first ravages of the city. In spite of the doom and darkness, he saw God working through adversities and seeking to bring His people to repentance.

Now we come to the period of exile. The people of the northern kingdom were exiled to Assyria. Then Judah fell captive to invading forces and the people were carried off to

Babylonia. A few poor Jews were left and the rest scattered. Prophets to the exiled people in Babylonia were Ezekiel and Daniel.

The first six chapters of the book of **Daniel** record the story of this young Hebrew and his friends, who never compromised their high standards to worship idols or conform to the heathen customs of their Babylonian captors.

Daniel's visions and interpretations of dreams foretold the course of history in Gentile nations, with the rise of succeeding empires: Chaldean (or Babylonian), Persian, Greek and Roman. Over all was seen the sovereignty of God. While scholars differ in their interpretations of Daniel's visions, most agree that his writings are the key to the book of Revelation and to our understanding of God's program through the ages.

Ezekiel, who had been a priest in Jerusalem, was taken to Babylon about 597 B.C. In this alien land his special mission was to help the Jews preserve their identity and religion. His priestly insistence on the law and his exalted ideals as a prophet made him a great influence on the exiled people.

About 539 B.C. the Jews began to return to their own land where they set to work restoring the temple and rebuilding the city of Jerusalem. Prophets of this post-exile period were Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi.

As they carried on their building projects, the Jews met with many difficulties and discouragements, but God used his prophet **Haggai** to bring them a message of encouragement.

A contemporary of the older Haggai, **Zechariah** came from a long line of prophets. He foretold Christ's entry into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. God spoke to him through visions. Gentile nations were included in Zechariah's prophecies.

"Bring all the tithes into the storehouse!" said **Malachi**, the last of the Old Testament prophets. The backsliding Jews were failing to bring tithes and offerings to the Lord and their worship had become formal and insincere. Malachi reminded the people that they would reap special blessings only when they brought God that which was rightfully His.

In review we should remember the three eras of prophecy. Before the exile there were eleven prophets: Jonah, Amos, Hosea, Joel, Obadiah, Isaiah, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Jeremiah and Habakkuk. During the exile there were two, Daniel and Ezekiel. After the exile Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi were God's messengers.

Before the exile the messages were of instruction and warning. During the exile the prophets wrote to bring hope to the captives. After the exile their words were full of encouragement.

While the prophet spoke to the people of his own generation, his was a living message for every generation and nation. He represented an unchangeable God, righteous and just.

He told of God's love and compassion, of man's sin and disobedience. His message was always: Be ye reconciled to God.

The prophets were ordinary men from many different walks of life, but they were God's representatives. God chose human channels to tell forth His message.

Looking forward, they told of the coming Messiah, naming Him the Son, the Light, the Shepherd, the Lamb who would bear God's judgment on behalf of the guilty. By His words and deeds Christ confirmed the message of the prophets.

As His representatives, God has chosen *us* to take a message similar to that of the prophets, for we must warn of God's judgment upon sin, bring hope of new life through faith in Jesus Christ, and give words of encouragement to those who are building the church of Christ.

"Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us; we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God," wrote the Apostle Paul. We must tell of Christ the Messiah, Who is the Son of God, the Light of the World, the Lamb Who bore God's judgment on behalf of the guilty.

A study of the Old Testament prophets and their writings will better fit us for the special work God has given us to do. At the same time we should remember that the New Testament is the key that unlocks the treasures to be found in the prophetic books, for Christ our Savior is the Messiah of Whom the prophets wrote and through Whom their hopes for the future are fulfilled.

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