

## SESSION #30

### Introduction to the Books of Prophecy

Before we plunge into the prophetic books themselves, let me cover some important introductory notes.

#### 1. Definitions

Let's take a look at the word "prophecy" first of all, because this is a word we'll see over and over again in these books. Prophecy is usually thought of as foretelling the future: someone who prophesies tells something in advance of its happening. But that is not really the primary meaning of "prophecy" in the Bible.

The primary meaning is not so much foretelling as forthtelling. That is, telling forth the word and will of God. Often the job of the prophets was not so much predicting the future, but contradicting the present. So yes, there is a predictive element to much of the prophetic ministry as these prophets look into the future, but a great deal of what they talk and write about is contradicting the situation in which they find themselves in the present; challenging the behavior of the kings, the priests and the people.

So the prophet, as G.L. Archer describes him was *"one called by God to proclaim as a herald from the court of heaven the message to be transmitted from God to man."* The prophet took God's message and transmitted it to the people.

On the other hand, the role of the priest was sort of a reverse parallel. The priest's role was to stand on behalf of the people, facing towards God, and from that position interceding on behalf of the people and doing service for the people before God.

So the prophet and priest roles were two sides of the same coin, both focused on God and the people, but facing as it were in opposite directions.

## **2. Qualifications of a prophet**

Let's look at the prophet himself, first of all. His qualifications included a number of things. The most important qualification was a Sovereign divine calling; he could not just become a prophet of his own volition. He had to be someone whom God had appointed and called to that role.

Then he had been given special abilities by God in order to fulfill the role that God had given to him, especially the ability to perceive the truth of God and then the ability to communicate that truth in relevant ways to the people of God of his day.

And then of course, he had to have some spiritual qualities. A prophet had to be obedient, unselfish, full of faith and courage, and very often long-suffering.

## **3. Primary Ministry of the Prophets**

Their primary ministry in OT times was to deliver God's message to God's people. But the problem over and over again was that the people to whom they brought God's message were unbelieving, backsliding, idol-worshipping, disobedient people so very often. Paul quoted Isaiah in Romans chapter 10, looking back at Isaiah's career as a prophet and quoting Isaiah as saying, "*Who has believed our report?*" We've taken the report from God, from His throne room, we've brought it to the people, Isaiah said, but having delivered it who believes it? His question is a rhetorical question; the answer is "nobody" – virtually nobody believed their report. So often that was the sad case.

## **4. Message of the Prophets**

The message of the prophets included a number of different aspects.

- a) The first was instructing the people about the great truths concerning God and man, whether or not they believed his message.
- b) Then secondly, the prophets often had a message warning those who were disobedient, wandering away from God, and warning them about the dangers of those choices.

c) But of course in all times, there will always be some people in the midst of all that unbelief and disobedience who will follow God. And so the prophets have a ministry also to those who are obedient. In this case, it's a ministry of comfort and encouragement to those who are trusting and obeying God. Very often that group was a small minority, but God still had a message for them.

d) And then, fourthly, the prophetic message could include prediction of various events yet to come. So, we will see combinations of this four-fold message throughout the books of the prophets.

## **5. Understanding the Prophets**

How do we know how we should understand the various messages of the prophets? Well, one of the things we need to recognize whenever we look at one of the books of the Old Testament prophets is the immediate setting in which that prophet lived. What was going on politically and spiritually, or even in terms of their economy, because the prophets gave God's message in context. We need to know the key elements of that context if we're going to understand what their message meant.

Secondly, we need to remember that all of human history is in the sovereign hands of an omnipotent, omniscient God who controls the affairs of history. And if we recognize this crucial truth as we read the messages of the prophets then it will help us to understand why they said what they said. Sometimes their message is not only difficult for the people of that day to believe and receive, but difficult for us too, unless we keep that assumption in mind.

And then there is a third thing to remember, because this also enters into so many of the messages of the prophets: Israel to whom the prophets immediately spoke, was a special nation – God's own chosen people. God had chosen them for His own special purposes that through this special nation God would reveal Himself to the rest of the world. So He treats Israel differently than the rest of the nations. And the messages of the prophets will take that into consideration.

Then one of the very important things we need to know concerning each prophet is to understand their particular focal point. Let me give you an illustration from geography.

Here is a photo I took in Banff National Park, just a few miles from our home in Calgary, Alberta. It's a beautiful area of Canada. The mountain in this picture is called the Three Sisters. If you hike or take a gondola lift up to the top of a mountain like this, you can see a great distance across a range of mountains. As you look along a mountain range you will soon discover a trick of perspective: a peak which is actually quite far away appears to be closer than it really is. And the mountain peaks in the distance will begin to hide the valleys that are in between them so that you may not realize how big those valleys are.

With that in mind, let's take a look at the focal point of the prophets because this will often include a foreshortening of perspective.

Let's assume that the prophet is as it were sitting on a mountain representing his own time period. That's where he lives; that's where he ministers, and the context in which he works has to do with his immediate time. So, when he delivers God's message to the people of his own time period, his focal point is the immediate setting, mountain peak #1 if you will.

But then as he looks a little bit further into the future, he sees another mountain peak. This is the mountain peak of the captivity of the people of God. Israel first and then Judah, will go into captivity to Assyria and Babylon respectively. And the prophets very often will see these future events as another mountain peak: the captivity of God's people and the restoration of God's people back to the land of Palestine again. And then they sometimes see beyond that mountain peak to a third mountain, which is away off in the future from their own time.

That was the first coming of Jesus Christ: his birth in Bethlehem, his earthly ministry, his death, burial and resurrection. Some prophets will even see beyond that mountain, away off into the future, a future that is still future from our own perspective as well.

This future fourth mountain peak has to do with the second coming of Jesus Christ, and the Millennial Kingdom, prophesied in the NT and fulfilled in the book of Revelation. Followed by the eventual new heavens and new earth as God brings everything to its final conclusion. We will need to recognize which mountain peak they are looking at as they give their messages. And we must also realize that as they look across the mountain range of time and write about things they see, they miss the valleys in between. The

result of the foreshortening effect is that mountain peaks in the distance can appear to be very close to them. For example, mountain peaks #2 and #3 often look like they are in the same plane of vision, but they're not. We know that those mountain peaks are hundreds of years apart.

And between mountain peaks #3 and #4 we know that there is at least 2000 years of valley in between those mountain peaks, but the prophets didn't know that. They didn't even see the valley. They just see those two mountain peaks off in the distance and they look as if they are both in the very same time period. But we live in that valley between #3 and #4 and we know that those mountain peaks are widely separated in time.

With these introductory notes in mind, let's examine the prophetic books basically in terms of the order in which they lived. This means our next session will take us into the book of Amos.

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