

The message of the prophets

Prophecy has its origin in the word of God. We have made it clear that prophecy must not be received on a purely human level, even though God used the human instrument in the communication of its message. It is always God speaking to His people through the prophets. Therefore, it must be grounded in the word of God.

The prophets were God's gift to His people. The message of the prophets is not about the prophet and his relationship with God, though that relationship is important as we have noted before. The prophets were to speak to the situation that the people were in, namely, their waywardness and need to return to God. We start with this text from Hebrews.

¹ Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. (Heb. 1:1-2)

God spoke and the world was created. The new creation came through the living Word, Jesus Christ. The word of God is the revelation of God. Because of the fall, the word of God which came through the prophets is directed to the finality in Christ. Paul made this clear in his letter to the Corinthians.

²⁰ For all the promises of God find their Yes in him (*Christ*). That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. ²¹ And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, ²² and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee. (2 Cor. 1:20-21)

So, what were the prophets supposed to say? Very simply, their words have to be the words of God, expressing the purpose of God and the plan God has for the redemption of humankind in Christ. Factored into this is the waywardness of humankind, their rebellion against the God who wants to reclaim them. Of necessity they need to speak to the situation where the people were in, i.e. where they had gone wrong and their departure from the laws of God. That has to be the message from God to His people.

Obviously, we cannot cover all that the prophets had spoken. We will take a few samples to illustrate the points I made above. I will put that into four broad groupings.

1. Confrontation with kings
2. Opposition to social inequality
3. The restoration
4. The coming Messiah.

The message of the prophets is a return to the God who has redeemed them and to heed His commandments.

1. Confrontation with kings

As we have noted in the last study with the call of Isaiah, his vision of the holiness of God brought about a profound sense of sin and God purged that for him. This is a necessary process for one to speak the words of God. This is a logical necessity as the prophet needs to be in an intimate relationship with God to know Him and to speak His words. Sin gets in the way of that process.

As a result of this and the waywardness of humanity, much of the prophetic word needs to be directed to this predicament of humankind. Humanity cannot continue to deny the truth of the essence of God and the relatedness of humankind to the creator. As a result of this denial, humanity has to find means to justify the situation they have set up for themselves. As this goes on, humanity then goes deeper and deeper into this denial as we are seeing today.

Therefore, much of the prophetic word addressed this situation. As God has chosen Israel to be His people in the setting up of His kingdom, the king of Israel should have been the leader to turn the people to God. However, most of the kings of Israel did not and even propagated this denial of the God who has chosen them. There is no surprise that much of prophetic word was directed at the leaders of Israel. Confrontation with the

kings was common in Israel. The words of Nathan the prophets, 'You are the man', is one of those well-known confrontations.

We saw last week that Jeremiah would need to confront nations and kingdoms.

⁹ Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the LORD said to me,
"Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.

¹⁰ See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to break down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant." (Jer. 1:9-10)

That must have been a scary task for the prophets in those days where kings held absolute power. We know the story of another confrontation, Elijah with King Ahab.

¹ Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word." ² And the word of the LORD came to him: (1 Kings 17:1-2)

The challenge at Mt Carmel recorded in 1 Kings 18-19 is again well known to us. Elijah was given the word of God and he spoke it.

With the confrontation against the sins of the nation, there must of necessity be the pronouncement of the judgment to come. Moses had given to Israel the Deuteronomic code as they set out for nationhood in the Promised Land. The prophets were well aware of that as they must if they were to speak the words of God. It is from this Deuteronomic code that they made their judgment of the nation. We may term this the forth-telling of the prophets. Blessings and curses are contained within the Deuteronomic code. Thus, the pronouncement of the judgement to come is not some supernatural foresight but rather the straight forward extrapolation of the sin and the curse that were contained within the code.

2. The Prophets often oppose social inequality

As a result of the poor leadership, sin and the total disregard for the laws of God permeated throughout the community. Instead of caring and supporting their neighbour, what followed was the exploitation of the other. Amos was a spokesman of these issues. This was about 100 years after Elijah. There was relative peace and prosperity in the land and the people were becoming complacent. They were turning to idols. This is a sample of what he wrote.

⁴ Hear this, you who trample on the needy
and bring the poor of the land to an end,
⁵ saying, "When will the new moon be over,
that we may sell grain?
And the Sabbath,
that we may offer wheat for sale,
that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great
and deal deceitfully with false balances,

⁶ that we may buy the poor for silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals
and sell the chaff of the wheat?"
⁷ The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob:
"Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.
⁸ Shall not the land tremble on this account,
and everyone mourn who dwells in it,
and all of it rise like the Nile,
and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of
Egypt?" (Amos 8:4-8)

In our past studies on Deuteronomy, we noted that the laws enunciated by Moses can be summarised as loving God and loving your neighbour. The disregard for laws of God can only result in exploitation of the other. Communities cannot continue with such exploitation. Jeremiah was another prophet who wrote against this.

²⁵ Your iniquities have turned these away,
and your sins have kept good from you.
²⁶ For wicked men are found among my people;
they lurk like fowlers lying in wait.
They set a trap;
they catch men.
²⁷ Like a cage full of birds,

²⁸ they have grown fat and sleek.
They know no bounds in deeds of evil;
they judge not with justice
the cause of the fatherless, to make it
prosper,
and they do not defend the rights of the
needy.

their houses are full of deceit;
therefore they have become great and rich;

²⁹ Shall I not punish them for these things?
declares the Lord,
and shall I not avenge myself
on a nation such as this?" (Jer. 5:25-29)

Though the psalms and proverbs are not regarded as prophetic literature, nonetheless they contain lots of references to the social inequality in communities. They showed very clearly that the God of Israel is not such a God. We see that in Psalm 113.

113 Praise the LORD!
Praise, O servants of the LORD,
praise the name of the LORD!
² Blessed be the name of the LORD
from this time forth and forevermore!
³ From the rising of the sun to its setting,
the name of the LORD is to be praised!
⁴ The LORD is high above all nations,
and his glory above the heavens!
⁵ Who is like the LORD our God,
who is seated on high,

⁶ who looks far down
on the heavens and the earth?
⁷ He raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy from the ash heap,
⁸ to make them sit with princes,
with the princes of his people.
⁹ He gives the barren woman a home,
making her the joyous mother of children.
Praise the LORD!
(Psalm 113)

This psalm talks of the God who though seated on high stoops low to lift up the down trodden. Loving one's neighbour is not a special task for the people of God but what the people of God would naturally do when they are restored to the image of God. Words like these abound in the psalms and prophetic writings, but the people of God, the Israelites, ignored that. They refused to hear and the judgment of God brought about a famine of hearing. Again, the prophet Amos wrote,

"Behold, the days are coming," declares the Lord God,
"when I will send a famine on the land—
not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water,
but of hearing the words of the Lord. (Amos 8:11)

It is not a famine of their material needs. It is not even a famine of the words of God. The prophets continue to herald forth the words of God. It is a famine of hearing the words of God. We may say that God has blocked off their hearing in judgment. We saw last week that the commission to Isaiah was like this.

⁹ And he said, "Go, and say to this people:
"Keep on hearing, but do not understand;
keep on seeing, but do not perceive."
¹⁰ Make the heart of this people dull,
and their ears heavy,
and blind their eyes;
lest they see with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed." (Isaiah 6:9-10)

When there is sin upon sin, down comes the judgment of God. They no longer have the ability to hear the words given to them. We need to note that the ability to hear, just as the ability to speak the words of God, is given by God. The ability to hear the words of God is a gift to us, a revelation to us. And so the psalmist says,

In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted,
but you have given me an open ear.
Burnt offering and sin offering
you have not required. (Psalm 40:6)

3. The restoration

It would be totally despairing had the prophetic word contain only condemnation and judgment. As we have said earlier, the prophetic word is directed to the final fulfilment in Christ. The prophetic word to Israel includes the restoration of Israel to her creator.

An important point to note in these prophetic proclamations is that they assume the fulfilment. We see this in Isaiah 40. We have said that the word of God is the revelation of God. That is true, but not only so. The word of God is also the accomplishment of God. The word accomplished what it said.

¹ Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that her warfare is ended,
that her iniquity is pardoned,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.

³ A voice cries:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;
make straight in the desert a highway for our
God.

⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

⁵ And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

⁹ Go on up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good news;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good news;
lift it up, fear not;
say to the cities of Judah,
“Behold your God!”
(Isa. 40:1-5, 9)

The context of this passage is this. The people of Israel were exiled in Babylon. The prophet Isaiah brought this message of hope and comfort to them. While still in captivity, they were informed of their impending return to Jerusalem as ‘the Lord has spoken’. They were not to sit and wait for this to happen. Rather, they were to shout out his good news as if it has already happened. The word that proceeds from the mouth of God includes its accomplishment.

While Israel may have been restored to her habitation in Jerusalem, that is not quite the final fulfilment. The restoration of Israel points to the final restoration of all creation in the coming Messiah as the prophets had seen earlier.

4. The coming Messiah

¹⁰ Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz: ¹¹ “Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” ¹² But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test.” ¹³ And he said, “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. (Isa. 7:10-14)

Again, this passage is well known to all of us and often brought up during Christmas. It is often thought to be a divine inspiration. I take the view that this is a logical development of thought when the prophet knew intimately the laws and purpose of God. The prophets would have seen over the decades after David and Solomon that the path Israel was taking would not lead them to the fulfilment of God’s promise to their father Abraham. Instead, it would go along the path to destruction. A new work of God had to happen. A new king would be needed if God’s promise be fulfilled. A radical change was required. This is the sign of future things.

¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. (Isa. 7:14)

So also was the prophecy of Jeremiah and Ezekiel of a new heart given to Israel. The old system had collapsed and unable to reach its fulfilment. It is no good clinging on to it hoping that things would change. God’s will and purpose will be fulfilled by God as Isaiah saw it.

¹⁶ He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede; then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him. (Isa. 59:16)

It is often recorded that the word of the Lord came to the prophet. There is no denial that there was a supernatural phenomenon happening. We are not told how that came about and obviously I cannot comment on that. However, what I want to do is to enable us to see that there is a process that God has already given

to His people. This has been seen and heard. What I am referring to is the deliverance from Egypt and the subsequent giving of the Ten Word and the laws. Both events were orchestrated through Moses.

In our first study on the prophets we noted that ‘there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face’ (Deut. 34:10). Obviously, the expression ‘face to face’ cannot be taken literally. It denotes a very intimate relationship with God as we have noted. Moses led Israel out of slavery in Egypt en route to the promised land. Along the way, at Mt Sinai, he delivered to the people of Israel the Ten Words and the laws in preparation for nationhood. The delivery from Egypt and the giving of the laws are the two anchor points for the prophets of Israel. They looked back to these two events in the history of Israel, and they could see the deviation in the path that Israel was taking. Hence, we see the confrontation with kings and the pronouncement of judgement against the social inequality in their communities.

Not only do they look back, they had also taken hold of the promises that God has given as part of the laws given through Moses. Take this for an example.

⁶ And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. (Deut. 30:6)

The prophets were well aware of what God has commanded and also what God has promised that He will do for His people as a result of the covenant made with Abraham.

⁷“The LORD will cause ... ⁸The LORD will command the blessing on you ... And he will bless you ... ⁹The LORD will establish you as ... ¹¹ And the LORD will make you ... ¹²The LORD will open to you ... ¹³ And the LORD will make you ... (Deut. 28:7-13).

There is enough in the Old Testament to point us away from a humanistic understanding of the laws of God. We need to see the laws of God as the grace of God given to us to guide and to lead us in the ways of righteousness, i.e. in the ways of God. God will not command something that He has not given us the ability to do. We need the resources that God has given to us, i.e. His grace and enabling.

The prophecies regarding the restoration and the coming Messiah need not be supernatural revelation of what God will do. I submit that their messages were already embedded in all that God had revealed to Moses. This was made clear through all that He did for Israel and through all that He has given to Israel in the revelation of His laws, including the blessings and curses. What I am saying here is that the prophecy of the coming Messiah was not given in a vacuum unrelated to what went before in Israel. It is nonetheless revelation that is related to the commands and promises that has already given to Israel.

There is no doubt that when the prophets saw the sad state of affairs in Israel, their minds will turn to the promises of God which they know intimately. They could see the inability of the people to respond under the system that existed at the time and knew that God would do a new thing in the days to come. A new king would come, quite unlike those in the present royal lineage, to rescue Israel. The process that would occupy the vision of the prophet is like this. The prophets would look back to the exodus and the Mosaic laws and from there look forward to the coming Messiah. This is an important vantage point as it will help us to understand New Testament prophecies which we will deal with next week.