

PROPHETIC PREACHING

then and now

by

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CHAPTER EIGHT

PLEADING WITH MEN TO ACCEPT SALVATION

"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings . . . that publisheth salvation" (Isaiah 52:7).

"Ho, everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat" (Isaiah 55:1).

If the Old Testament prophets were preaching in churches today, what would they say? Doubtless they would be preaching on the same subjects identically that they were proclaiming six to eight centuries before CHRIST. They would be evangelists, preaching repentance and faith as the way of salvation, for they had a passion for souls. They would be evangelists with beautiful feet (Isaiah 52:7).

The hope of salvation through the coming Messiah was held up by the prophets like a torch through many, many years of midnight darkness. Prophets of today can make and should make the pathway to salvation clear to people in darkness, and as alluring as a flowery path in the springtime. A group of theological students vividly remember how George W. Truett stood in chapel and exhorted them in earnest and plaintive tones: "O young preachers, make it clear to people how to be saved; make it very clear how to be saved!"

The evangelistic call telling men how to be saved through CHRIST is the heart-beat of prophetic preaching. **"The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy"** (Revelation 19:10). The rebukes voiced by the prophets, the warnings, the tears, the appeals, all revolved around the desire of GOD for people to be saved. To tell of GOD's love for lost souls is the supreme purpose of GOD for calling men into a prophetic ministry.

GOD Longing for Men to Be Saved

In the days of the Old Testament prophets, as well as now, there were people so foolish as to say, "GOD is too good to send anyone to hell."

The prophet Ezekiel was quick to emphasize that GOD had no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 33:11). GOD longs for men to turn from their evil ways and to live. A

discerning prophet of a loving GOD never gives people the impression that GOD hates sinners. GOD loves sinners with an undying love; it is death-dealing sin which GOD hates with a fierceness born of his righteous love.

When a man himself chooses to reject GOD and thereby is lost, it should never be blamed on GOD. If he is separated from GOD by his own choice and dies, he is responsible, not GOD. After death men must live with their own choices (Revelation 22:11).

Hosea implored: **"O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God; for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity"** (Hosea 14:1).

Prophets Praying for Sinners

A prayerless prophet is a powerless prophet.

Although intercessory prayer is chiefly a priestly function, any prophet who loves people will implore GOD in agonizing prayer for lost people.

Moses uttered a prayer for Israel which was selfless and passionate, wrung from a devout soul:

"Moses returned unto the Lord and said, Oh, this people have sinned a great sin, and have made them gods of gold. Yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sins; and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written" (Exodus 32:31-32).

There are many other instances of Moses praying intercessory prayers (Exodus 34:9; Numbers 11 :2, 14:19-20; Deuteronomy 9:18-26).

The prophet Samuel at Mizpah prayed for Israel until they confessed their sins to GOD (I Samuel 7:5-6). Jeremiah ranked Samuel next to Moses as an intercessor (Jeremiah 15:1).

Amid the imprecations and prophecies of doom made by Jeremiah he prayed that his eyes might be a fountain of tears. He wept day and night as he confessed his own sins as well as the sins of his people (Jeremiah 9:1; 14:7, 17-21).

After Habakkuk had surveyed the tragic conditions of morality and spirituality in his nation and the nations round about him, he flung himself at the feet of the Almighty in prayer for a revival of GOD's work in the midst of the years (Habakkuk 3:2).

Prophets Urging Men to Repent

The faithful prophets, almost without an exception, denounced sin and pleaded for repentance. A would-be prophet is strikingly unlike the mighty Prophet of Galilee if sin does not hurt him to the depths of his heart. The prophets of old usually had fire in their hearts but tears in their eyes when they denounced sin. They knew that unless a man was convicted of sin he would not implore GOD for forgiveness. A prophet will put people to sleep while preaching about GOD's forgiveness unless first they are made conscious that they are in dreadful need of forgiveness.

Isaiah called sins by their well-known names; he charged people openly and fearlessly with corrupt business deals, harlotry, murder, alcoholic drinking, greed for land, thievery, bribery, injustice in the courts and other such sins.

Likewise Jeremiah in his great Temple sermon (Jeremiah 7) denounced oppression of the poor, lack of justice in the courts, greedy violence, heathen worship, stealing, lying, murder, adultery, slander, and perjury. He predicted punishment for their sins, and asked, "What else can GOD do?" (Jeremiah 9:1-7). The same sort of specific name-calling of sins was true of Amos (Amos 4:15), Hosea (Hosea 4:11-19; 7:1-4), Micah (Micah 7:1-5), and many others.

Sinners need to be told by prophets about their sins and their need for forgiveness.

- there are personal sins and social sins,
- sins of omission and of commission,
- sins of profanity and of Sabbath breaking,
- sins of adultery and of drunkenness,
- sins of hating and of coveting,
- sins of sensuality and of gluttony,
- sins of lying and of swearing,
- sins of cheating in school and of cheating on income tax reports,
- sins of worshipping money and of forgetting GOD.

Sin! sin! sin! Prophets of the most High GOD, with thunder in their voices like Amos but with tears in their eyes like Hosea and pain in their hearts like Jeremiah, tell people about the sinfulness of their sins and the destruction that comes therefrom, unless they repent.

Repentance is the most reasonable thing that GOD could require of one who sins. It was preached by the prophets much more frequently, it seems, than it is today.

Various prophets gave various reasons why men should repent.

Amos called for repentance, demanding a "**returning unto the Lord**" (Amos 4:6, 8-11), or else they would come to judgment and destruction.

Hosea extolled the love of GOD who would forgive sinners, even if their sins were as heinous as the sins of Gomer, his wife. He promised that if they repented GOD would heal their backsliding, would love them freely, would be to them like the fresh dew of the morning, would make them grow as a lily, would make them as beautiful as the olive trees, would cause them to grow as the corn or the vine (Hosea 14:4-7).

The doctrine of repentance, preached so lovingly and so eloquently by Hosea, was voiced persuasively by Isaiah and afterwards by Jeremiah.

Isaiah pleaded, "**Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord**" (Isaiah 55:6).

Jeremiah reasoned practically, "**Only acknowledge thine iniquity, that thou hast transgressed**

against the Lord thy God . . . Turn, O backsliding children, saith the Lord; for I am married unto you" (Jeremiah 3:13-14).

This doctrine, preached so fervently and so insistently by the prophets, was repeated and reiterated by John the Baptist and JESUS. Surely a modern prophet can ill afford to relegate the doctrine to a minor place in his preaching.

Prophets Promising a New Heart

Early Old Testament prophets thought of the Lord as belonging to the Hebrew nation exclusively, and preached national repentance.

Since repentance must be experienced individually and with heartfelt sincerity, the prophets probed deeper and deeper into the individual soul-life. They preached less and less to men in general, more and more to a man in particular. They preached more and more frequently about personal repentance and faith and obedience, promising that the Lord would give them a new heart (Jeremiah 17:5-10). They got to the heart of the matter by seeking to persuade men to get right toward GOD in their hearts. After David was rebuked by the prophet Nathan, he cried, "**Create in me a clean heart, a God**" (Psalm 51:10).

With Jeremiah, a man's relation to GOD was determined by his spiritual attitudes, by repentance, faith, emotions, will, love. A man must bear the responsibility of his choices and sins. He could not put the blame on others or upon society; he could not say "**the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge**" (Jeremiah 31 :29). He preached that the law of GOD must be written on an individual's heart (Jeremiah 31:33).

Jeremiah tersely avowed that it was no more possible for an individual to cleanse his heart from iniquity without the help of GOD than it was for an Ethiopian to change his color or a leopard to change his spots (Jeremiah 13:23). He declared that the Lord would give them a heart to know him, when they would return to him with their whole hearts (Jeremiah 24:7). GOD would put the law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts (Jeremiah 31:33). The Lord would give them one heart so that they would fear him forever and that they would not depart from him (Jeremiah 32:39-40).

Ezekiel took up the theme of a change of heart, promising that GOD would replace a stony heart with a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 11:19). Furthermore, he said GOD would give a new spirit within this new heart (Ezekiel 18:31-32). Within these two verses (31-32), may be found the basic doctrines of evangelistic preaching:

- (1) a righteous but forgiving GOD,
- (2) repentance,
- (3) regeneration, and
- (4) the work of the Holy Spirit within.

The New Testament doctrine of regeneration could not be preached more strikingly and with more hair-raising vividness than by a sermon based on Ezekiel's eerie description of the dry bones in the valley which received the breath of life from GOD (Ezekiel 37:1-10). Old-fashioned

preaching? It is as old-fashioned as the preaching of these holy men of old.

Prophets Pressing the Invitation

Prophetic preaching is fervently evangelistic. The prophets concluded their sermons on the doctrines of grace with urgent invitations to people to repent, to trust GOD, to obey him, and to serve him. They made their appeals to the intellect, emotion, and will of a man. They appealed for decisions which were personal, imperative, final, and total commitment of life. Like Joshua, they challenged people; "**Choose you this day whom you will serve**" (Joshua 24:15).

The prophet Elijah on Mt. Carmel called in zealous urgency for a decision: "**How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him**" (I Kings I:18). When Elijah called fire down from Heaven, he was what people today call a *sensational evangelist*.

Amos uttered stern warnings to Israel about the judgments that would come upon them inevitably, because of the wrath of GOD toward their sins. He exhorted, "**Prepare to meet thy God!**" (Amos 4:12). Amos was what modern people would call "*a hell-fire and damnation*" preacher.

The last chapter in Hosea's prophecy is a plea for a decision by his people to return to the Lord, the climax of a continual invitation to accept GOD's forgiving grace. He appeals, "**Take with you words, and return unto the Lord; say unto him, take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously.**" He was speaking like an evangelist giving an invitation at the close of his sermon. *He was an emotional preacher.*

Isaiah with his erudite mind called for a decision made by one's intellect and reasoning power, declaring that GOD is willing to help a sinner think through his problem of redemption. He invited, "**Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool**" (Isaiah 1:18). Isaiah was a *scholarly evangelist*, somewhat like a doctor of theology or a seminary teacher.

Ezekiel was one of Israel's most influential prophets. He was like a shepherding pastor to a flock of captive people. He alternated consolations and warnings, all the while interspersing gracious invitations and tender appeals. He urged them, "**Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed: and make you a new heart and a new spirit, for why will ye die, O house of Israel?**" (Ezekiel 18:31). Ezekiel was what people now would call a *pastor-evangelist*.

When Isaiah foresaw the Saviour so clearly and preached about him so winsomely (Isaiah 53), it is no wonder that he gave such a spiritual, heart-searching, and appealing evangelistic invitation: "**Ho, everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat: yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price**" (Isaiah 55:1). The prophet's mind was flashing like lightning, his heart was ablaze with love, and his tongue seems to have been touched with a live coal from off the altar of Heaven. His invitation song had something of a "hallelujah chorus" in it. He was a *Spirit-filled, Christ-centered evangelist*.

When one preaches about the CHRIST of GOD, as this ancient prophet did, a yearning for the salvation of lost souls will burst out in a persuasive exhortation to accept GOD's offer of salvation. Isaiah earnestly wooed the people:

"Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord" (Isaiah 55:6-7).

A preacher with such a message about salvation through CHRIST, as Isaiah delivered, always seems to come on beautiful feet, beautiful indeed to those to whom he brings the good tidings of salvation and peace (Isaiah 52:7).

FOR BIBLE STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What is the Bible's justification for having evangelists? What are their Scriptural qualifications?
2. In what area of a man's life does sin begin? How did JESUS illustrate it in the Sermon on the Mount?
3. What is Scriptural repentance? What things may be confused with it but fall short?
4. In what right spirit and in what wrong spirit may a preacher denounce specific sins?
5. What should be included and made plain in an invitation to accept salvation through CHRIST?

~ end of chapter 8 ~

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