

PROPHETIC PREACHING

then and now

by

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CHAPTER SEVEN

PROMISING A GLORIOUS FUTURE

"But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings" (Malachi 4:2).

If one desires to preach like the prophets, he must be an optimist as well as a realist. Isaiah and Ezekiel and other giant-like preachers of the Old Testament voiced abounding optimism about a glorious future under the righteous rule of the Lord. This was prophesied to come when the people turned from their unrighteousness and ungodliness to obey the Lord of Hosts. Unless these prophets had preached this glorious hope for the future, they could not have exerted such profound influences upon their own and succeeding generations.

If preaching is to influence people to worship a GOD of holiness, to obey a GOD of righteousness and to love a GOD of grace, its message must reveal the spiritual results of such obedience and love. Preaching should do more than denounce the sinfulness of sin; it must also declare the eternal hope which is promised through CHRIST.

Influential preachers:

- combine inspiration with condemnation,
- combine acceptance of salvation with forsaking of sin,
- combine allurements to Heaven with warning about hell,
- combine grace and mercy with retribution and judgment.

Billy Sunday is quoted as having said about preaching: "Always leave some cookies on the bottom shelf."

Restoration of Nation Prophesied

The promise to the Jews that they would be returned from exile and restored to a happy life in their homeland was to them almost like the promise of Heaven is to people today. Isaiah went quite beyond mere promise of restoration from captivity. He soared to the heights of abounding enthusiasm about the coming of an eternal ruler whose name should be Wonderful Counselor, Mighty GOD, Everlasting Father, who would sit in majestic glory forever on the throne of

David, and rule in righteousness as the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:1-7).

Even Jeremiah, who saw the darkest clouds on the horizon of the future, saw also the gray streaks of the light of a coming dawn piercing the darkness. With keen perception he saw that the captivity of Judah would last precisely seventy years (Jeremiah 29:10). Just as soon as he had predicted the seventy years of captivity, he promised liberation. The words of Jeremiah in Chapters 30-33 almost sound like the joyous and encouraging words of Isaiah (Isaiah 40-66), as they glow radiantly with hope and promise for the future. In Jeremiah's words concerning the future may be found the seed of the doctrines of the love of GOD the Father, the redemption made possible through the new covenant of grace which was to be sealed by the blood of GOD the Son, and the overflowing joys of the communion of GOD the Holy Spirit.

Hosea wept as he condemned the sins of the people of Judah, but he promised healing of their wounds if they of Zion would repent (Hosea 5:13; 6:1).

He had a vision of a bright future. He held out a hope for the nation to blossom like a lily eventually, to become as beautiful as an olive tree, to be as verdant as growing grain (Hosea 14:4-7).

Amos thundered denunciation upon those who were guilty of social sins, but he was quick to declare that the Lord was a forgiving GOD who would restore Israel. There would be flourishing cities, fruited fields, happy abundance (Amos 9:11-15).

A glorious Jerusalem was envisioned by Zechariah when he lifted up his eyes (Chapter 2). A young man with a measuring rod was told that the new Jerusalem was so large it could not be measured. It would not need a city wall for protection; GOD would be like a wall of fire about it and would be the glory in the midst of it (Zechariah 2:5). Jerusalem would be populated with contented old people living in peace (Zechariah 8:4), with happy children playing in the streets in safety (Zechariah 8:5), with prosperous people living in plenty (Zechariah 8:12). Even the bells on the harness of the horses and the rattling of kitchen utensils would sound forth the message of the holiness of the Lord (Zechariah 14:20-21). Jerusalem was the apple of GOD's eye (Zechariah 2:8).

Like the nostalgic exiles who sat down by the rivers in Babylon and wept for their beloved Jerusalem (Psalm 137), the hearts of modern men can find no assurance of salvation, no satisfying joy, no peace or hope, until they find them in GOD through JESUS CHRIST the Saviour.

If a preacher follows the example of the prophets, he will herald in glowing terms the golden promises of the Gospel of CHRIST. The ever-brightening hope which the Old Testament prophets preached was but the foregleam of the sunrise of the blessed hope which was revealed from GOD through CHRIST. The Gospel of CHRIST offers such heavenly gifts as forgiveness of sin, cleansing of the conscience, power over temptation, joy in service, happiness in Christian fellowship, growth in Christlikeness, a triumphant victory over death, and eternal blessedness in Heaven.

Hope Held Out to Remnant

It was to a remnant only that the prophets promised a glorious future, not to all of the people of Israel. The prophets were not "universalists"; they preached that only those who repented and put faith in GOD would be saved. They saw that it was a narrow way leading to salvation and comparatively few would find it.

The prophet Joel, early in the nation's history, spoke of a remnant that would be delivered, a remnant made up of those who would call upon the name of the Lord (Joel 2:32).

Likewise, Amos declared that the Lord GOD of Hosts would bestow grace upon a remnant on condition that they would hate evil, love goodness, and see that justice to the people was meted out in their courts (Amos 5:15).

Micah, a contemporary of Amos, not only foretold the restoration of the remnant but foresaw the remnant under GOD becoming a mighty missionary agency among the Gentiles (Micah 2:12; 4:7; 5:7-8).

GOD's mightiest works often are done through God-called and consecrated minorities.

Comfort and Salvation Offered to People

Isaiah had a way of holding out the brightest hope during the darkest part of the night (Isaiah 10:17-22).

When the future of the Jewish people seemed most barren,

- he predicted Israel's survival and salvation.
- he exalted a glorious Saviour.
- he predicted the Saviour's virgin birth and his meaningful name, Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14).
- he envisioned the salvation by this Saviour as being like people who are lost in darkness but see a great light.

"The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined" (Isaiah 9:2).

Isaiah saw a perfect social order under the righteous rule of the Saviour, a Branch out of the rod of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1-9). He used ornate and vivid metaphors in describing the social order that would prevail under the Prince of Peace. He foresaw a warless world with men converting their instruments of war into implements of peaceful agriculture (Isaiah 2:5). In striking language he described this social order as a time when wolves and lambs would dwell together in peaceful accord, when cows and bears would eat peacefully together, when children would not be hurt while playing on a serpent's den, when the knowledge of the Lord would cover the earth like waters cover the depths of the sea (Isaiah 11:1-9). It was an alluring way to describe a heavenly ideal which is attainable under the glorious Saviour's righteous rule.

Isaiah was a prophet of salvation and comfort (Isaiah 40-66).

It is said that for every person in a church pew today who needs correction and denunciation, there are ten persons who need comfort and love. In Chapters forty to sixty-six of Isaiah there are words of exquisite charm and infinite comfort. "**Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God**" (Isaiah 40:1) is as painfully appropriate and as dreadfully needed in pulpits today as ever in the history of GOD's dealings with men.

No passage in the Old Testament inspires a God-called preacher to herald the Gospel more than these latter chapters in Isaiah. These words have in them a literary beauty like the beauty of the rainbow, majestic thought like the majesty of the mountains, a wideness of vision like the wideness of the sea, a flowing oratory like the rushing of Niagara, an awe-inspiring power like the flash of lightning across a storm-swept sky, a fragrant restfulness like a rose garden in full bloom, the spirit of worshipfulness like soft organ music in a dedicated sanctuary. The strength, power, and appeal of it all is the message of GOD's tender mercy, forgiving grace, and abundant salvation.

What an ideal for preaching!

Hope for Heaven Preached

Within every heart there is an unquenchable thirst for assurance of a better life to come. The human heart is weary of spiritual wanderings and it wants an eternal home. It despairs under continual disappointments. It is restive under the frailties of the flesh and with the illnesses that plague the body. There is an irrepressible faith that springs up continuously in the human heart, believing that there awaits a Heaven where no sin abounds and no sorrow comes, a Heaven of bliss in the presence of Deity and all his redeemed. Tennyson expressed it:

"Thou wilt not leave us in the dust:
Thou madest man, he knows not why,
He thinks he was not made to die;
And thou hast made him: thou art just."

- In Memoriam

The prophets believed in immortality with a growing perception and conviction about it.

- they had the Scripture about Enoch whom GOD took (Genesis 5:24).
- they treasured the last recorded words of Moses: "**The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms**" (Deuteronomy 33:27).
- they knew how Elijah had been caught up in a chariot of fire and taken into Heaven by a whirlwind (II Kings 2:11).

Among the earlier preaching prophets the idea of the future life was somewhat obscure and was mentioned only occasionally. The glory which they foresaw was principally the glory that would come to the nation Israel. Later, when Judah was in exile in Babylon the nation ceased to exist, and their hopes for the future became personal. In their thinking they made tremendous advances toward the New Testament conception of Heaven, a Heaven not on earth but in a transcendental sphere of bliss beyond death. The vision of Heaven grew brighter.

Job believed in the affirmative when he asked his question, "**If a man die, shall he live again?**" (Job 14:14). He could boldly exclaim by faith, "**I know that my redeemer liveth . . . in my flesh shall I see God**" (Job 19:25-26).

The Psalmist was assured of life in glory after death, when he said, "**Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me in glory**" (Psalm 73:24).

Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones dramatically revealed his belief in the resurrection (Ezekiel 37).

Daniel saw beyond the resurrection an everlasting life where soul-winners would shine as stars for ever and ever (Daniel 12:2-3).

JESUS and the Apostles were inspired greatly by the teachings of the prophets about the resurrection and Heaven. JESUS continually prophesied both. On the day of Pentecost Simon Peter quoted Psalm 16:10 to show that CHRIST rose from the dead according to prophecy (Acts 2:31). The Apostle Paul, in his incomparable discussion in I Corinthians 15 about the resurrection, was inspired to quote Isaiah 25:8 and Hosea 13:14 in his exultant outburst about the victory over death and the grave.

The author of Revelation was saturated in mind and heart with the teachings of the prophets about the ineffable joys of the future life in Heaven. Much of the imagery of Heaven as described in Revelation was taken directly from the Old Testament prophets.

For example, the song "**Holy, holy, holy**" which was sung by the four winged beasts that John saw before the throne (Revelation 4:8) was sung by the seraphim which Isaiah heard during his vision (Isaiah 6:1-8).

An extended list of such references can be made.

Revelation 21:1, "**A new heaven and a new earth,**" is taken from Isaiah 65:17 and 66:22.

Revelation 21:3, "**The tabernacle of God is with men,**" is taken from Ezekiel 37:27.

Revelation 21:4, "**God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain,**" is taken from Isaiah 25:8 and 35:10.

Revelation 21:23, "**The city hath no need of the sun,**" is taken from Isaiah 60:19-20.

Revelation 21:24, "**The nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honor into it,**" is taken from Isaiah 60:3 and 49:23.

Revelation 21:25, "**The gates of it shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there,**" is taken from Isaiah 60:11 and Zechariah 14:7.

Revelation 21:27, "**And there shall in no wise enter into it anything that defileth,**" is taken from Ezekiel 44:9.

Revelation 22:1, "**A pure river of water of life,**" is taken from Ezekiel 47:1, and Revelation 22:2, "**The tree of life,**" is taken from Ezekiel 47:12.

Revelation 22:5, "**And they shall reign for ever and ever,**" is taken from Daniel 7:18.

The only perfect criterion for preaching on Heaven is found in him who said, "**In my Father's house are many mansions . . . I go to prepare a place for you . . . that where I am, there ye may be also**" (John 14:2-3).

This discourse on Heaven by him who came from Heaven is doubtless the most beloved passage in all the New Testament. It is true because every heart in any congregation anywhere is hungry for assurance of Heaven hereafter.

FOR BIBLE STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What Scriptures besides the prophetic writings made Israel expect a future King like David? Who announced to Mary that this was being fulfilled?
2. Has Zechariah's prophecy about a glorious Jerusalem ever been realized? Can his prophecy be used in present-day preaching?
3. What safe rule can be used in applying the prophecies of a restored Jerusalem to thinking and preaching about Heaven?
4. What contribution did the Apostle Paul make to the hope for immortality, the second coming of CHRIST, and Heaven?

~ end of chapter 7 ~

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