

MESSAGES FROM THE PROPHETS

Study 1

FROM GOD - TO MAN



Deuteronomy 18: 9-22; Luke 24: 25-49

How much do you know about that section of the Old Testament known as the Prophets? It is possible that you have looked at this rather large section of the Bible and felt it was too heavy and involved for you to read? Maybe at some time you have begun to read Jeremiah or Ezekiel, but found that you were not getting much out of it, and that it did not seem to be very relevant to your situation or needs.

Undeniably, the Prophets are quite difficult to read and master. Yet they play an important part in the history of Israel, and we shall lose much if we do not try to grasp something of their message. It is true to say that the teaching of the Prophets, is to the Nation of Israel what the teaching of the New Testament Epistles is to the Church. Keep this point in mind as we make our study of the messages from the prophets.

At each stage of Israel's history God had His MEN to speak His MESSAGE. This is what makes the prophets so interesting, because these men were a vital part of the history of their day. Circumstances demanded WHAT they said and made it effective WHEN they said it. We read these messages today, many centuries after they were spoken and written, and they still have something to say to us. This is why we should give time to study what they say.

WHAT is a PROPHET?

A prophet is a person who tells out God's message to men. Thus he comes FROM GOD to men. Notice how he differs from a PRIEST; a priest represented MEN before God - he went FROM MEN to God. So you have this "two-way process", from God to men and from men to God. If you think of religious life in the Old Testament, you will realise that it is built around these two great ideas. It is therefore clear that a prophet was a MAN with a MISSION and a MESSAGE from God to the people.

WHERE do we find the first PROPHET?

To find the answer to this, we can turn to Luke's words concerning the Lord Jesus on the road to Emmaus. **"Beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself". (Luke 24: 27)** It is interesting to notice that when the Lord Jesus wanted to show these baffled people the meaning of His mission, He appealed to writings which came from centuries prior to His coming into the world. We will notice as we study the prophets that they not only spoke of current issues, but frequently predicted future events. The Old Testament is full of prophecies that even yet have to be fulfilled. This makes the Bible such a fascinating Book. From Moses onwards through Samuel, David, Elijah and Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah and many others, God spoke to the people.

WHY did they SPEAK?

We will need to know the reason for their messages, if we are going to understand them. You will find that between Isaiah and Malachi many hundreds of years passed by and much happened in the lives of the people of Israel. Each prophet fulfilled God's purpose in the movement of history. Each had a God-given reason for speaking. One phrase you will find repeated over and over again is, **"Thus says the Lord"**. Thus they spoke to men because GOD SPOKE TO THEM. They also spoke to awaken people to the fact that they were sinning against God. Often they came with a call to repentance and a warning of judgment to come. Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah actually saw the people go into Captivity, as their words went unheeded. Those like Haggai and Zechariah prophesied to the people after the Captivity was over. Yet all had one thing in common - they spoke because they were inspired by God to do so. They were called to serve their God in this way.

WHAT kind of men were the PROPHETS?

It is important to ask this question because they filled an important position in their day. Careful reading will show that they were just ordinary men. They did not come from one special tribe of people as the priests did. They were a cross-section of the community. Each was different, but God used them in their own particular time and place. Isaiah was a statesman, while Amos was a herdsman; Jeremiah and Ezekiel were priests, while Hosea was just a family man. This makes the reading of their messages very meaningful. We might never have heard of them if they had not met with God and spoken for Him. Ordinary men for extraordinary work! This is often how God works! Yet their personalities are not submerged beneath the work they do. We can learn the lesson that God can use us as we are. Whatever we are and have, He wants us to surrender to Himself as the prophets did of old, so that He can speak through us to the people of OUR day.

HOW do we know that their messages were GENUINE?

Deuteronomy 18 is an important passage in this context. It is obvious that in the Old Testament people had to deal with false prophets. To prophesy falsely was a sin worthy of death. **(verse 20)** Men like Elisha had to contend with such imposters. The acid test is given in **verses 21-22**. If they spoke from God and their words were fulfilled, then this proved that they were genuine. God stood by and honoured the word of His servants. We shall see in our studies how, when the Lord Jesus came to Earth, many prophecies were fulfilled. Often those who spoke did not fully understand their message. But God will ensure that no word spoken at His command will fall useless to the ground. **(Isaiah 55: 10-11)**

Study carefully then these Old Testament books.

Study 2

ISAIAH - GOD IS HOLY

Read

Isaiah Chapter 6

In each of our studies in the lives and work of the Old Testament prophets we shall, above everything else, try to learn what they say about God. If you read their writings carefully, and I hope you will, you will find that they say many things in common with each other. This is the miracle of prophecy. Many years separated their human lives - the majority of them never met. Yet there is an amazing unity about their messages. This is outstanding proof that God, through His Spirit, inspired these men to write as they did. They were literally men who spoke from God.

We are considering the written prophets - those who wrote their visions and messages down. These begin with Amos and mark a very important stage in the role of prophecy. Elijah, Elisha, and their contemporaries never committed their messages to writing, although we have them in the context of their histories. They spoke, but never wrote. But our lessons concern written prophecy - teachings and predictions that were in a written form, and were handed down so that we have them today. Their messages were relevant to their contemporaries as they spoke to the nation of current evils and future judgement. So we need to look at Isaiah and the others in the light of the days in which they lived.

Chapter 1: 1 of Isaiah gives the names of the kings of Israel during whose reigns the prophet lived and spoke. Notice that they were kings of JUDAH, not ISRAEL. The kingdom of Israel was divided into two sections. The Northern Kingdom comprising of ten of the tribes of Israel and the Southern Kingdom made up of the other two tribes, those of Benjamin and Judah. Isaiah prophesied to the Southern tribes. King Uzziah of Judah died in about 740 B.C., and it was in this year that Isaiah had the vision of which we read in **chapter 6**. Let us consider in our lesson the call and character of Isaiah's Mission. We can look at it in three ways.

1. THE VISION.

If you read the history of Uzziah you will find that he was one of Judah's great kings and he did many things that pleased God. Yet he sinned against God in presuming to engage in such activities as belonged only to a priest. For this, he was stricken with leprosy and remained a leper until the day of his death, because of his unholy act.

Read 2 Chronicles Chapter 26. It was in the year that Uzziah died, that Isaiah saw the Lord. It was a challenging vision given to him. Quite possibly Isaiah felt deep sorrow for the king's condition at his death. He also felt the gradual lowering of standards among his people. The prophecy of Isaiah contains many words of condemnation for the unholy practices of the people of the Lord. But notice what he saw. The Lord was enthroned as king and before Him the heavenly beings continually cried, "**Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory**". (**verse 3**) God was about to call Isaiah to the task of speaking to the nation. He was going to show Himself to them as the "**Holy One of Israel**." So at the outset of his mission, Isaiah is filled with a sense of the purity of his God.

Similarly for us today as Christians, we stand for a God that is holy and pure, God has not changed. We are surrounded by everything that is sinful and defiled. But let us remember that we represent God, and as He calls us to serve Him and

speak for Him, we must honour Him by the purity of our lives. Isaiah never forgot the VISION that was given to him by God.

2. THE VOICE.

We notice the effect that the vision of the Lord had on Isaiah. **Verse 5** tells us that he became aware of sin and uncleanness. He realises that not only is he a man of unclean lips, but also that the whole nation is unclean as well. Two things happen at this point. His lips are cleansed by the coal from off the altar; and he hears the voice, "**Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?**" (**verses 6-8**) Once he was cleansed God was ready to call him and use him.

Here is an important lesson for us to learn. Before God can use us we must be clean. Through the work of the Lord Jesus at the cross, our sin and uncleanness can be taken away and we can be made fit to serve a holy God. Remember, as you think about this, that God can only use clean and holy lives in His service.

3. THE VOCATION.

As Isaiah heard the voice from the throne he was ready to respond. "**Here am I! Send me**". (**verse 8**) He was willing and ready to obey the call and it was here that his life's work began. It was not going to be an easy task to fulfil. God made clear to him that the people to whom he went would not be responsive to his message. They would be wilfully deaf and also rebellious against the Lord. There would be no response to the challenge of God from Heaven. Yet Isaiah was willing to go and God sent him.

From this brief study you can see how Isaiah, the man, gave character to the message for his nation. Because he had seen the holiness of the Lord, he was able to throw out the challenge to those in the nation whose lives were unholy. Look through the book and especially notice the sins that are condemned, and also the way in which God reveals Himself. You will find some great chapters which not only condemn, but also those which give comfort (**chapter 40**) and promise the coming of the Messiah. (**chapter 53**) Sad to say that Isaiah's message did not stem the tide of evil in the nation, and so in about 587 B.C. the Babylonians came and carried away the people into captivity in Babylon.

Study 3

AMOS - GOD IS RIGHTEOUS

Read

Amos Chapters 5 & 7: 10-16

The prophet Amos was quite a different kind of man from Isaiah, the great "statesman - prophet". Amos was a herdsman from Tekoa. In **chapter 7 verses 14-15**, we have quite a vivid account of how he came to serve the Lord in the way he did. The priest, Amaziah, opposes the outspoken words of the prophet, condemning the exile in the court of King Jeroboam II of Israel. Because of this, Amos is told to take himself and his prophecies elsewhere. (**7: 12**) It is then that he protests concerning his status as a prophet and he tells of the time when the Lord took him while he followed the flock. It was during an ordinary working-day, that Amos was called to go and prophesy to Israel.

THE TIMES OF AMOS.

It must be noted that it was to ISRAEL that Amos was sent, not JUDAH. This means that his message was to the Northern Kingdom. The centre of this kingdom was Samaria. During the reign of King Jeroboam II, Israel as a nation grew strong

and prosperous. Their existence was relatively peaceful and the extent of Israel's borders widened. Historians say that these days were the best for the nation since the end of Solomon's reign. But later on this was to decline, and as the power and influence of Assyria grew, so the security of Israel diminished, until eventually Samaria was overthrown and the captivity of the nation took place in 722 B.C. This sad result came as God's judgment on them because of their sin.

Prosperity does not always produce good character or happiness. It was obvious that the effect of growth and wealth upon the Nation of Israel was to make it more godless and evil. Outwardly the people were very religious. They still had their sacred shrines at Bethel and Gilgal. **(4: 4)** But in God's sight these were places of sin and hypocrisy and the sacrifices they offered did not please Him. **(5: 22)** Alongside their hypocrisy went dishonesty and oppression. The rich were very rich and added to their wealth by injustice and extortion. The poor were very poor and under the oppression of wealthy and unscrupulous landowners who treated them as slaves. It was perhaps when Amos went to the marketplace to trade his flocks and other wares, that he heard the general gossip concerning the state of the nation. As he heard of the unjust inequalities and degradation, he would burn with anger. The evils of his day would burden him until he could not keep silent. He just had to cry out against the sins of his people and call them back to God.

THE TEACHING OF AMOS.

The message of Amos can be summed up quite briefly - God is RIGHTEOUS. In the face of all the wrong-doing he saw, he just said clearly - GOD IS RIGHT. I hope you will read the Book of Amos right through, and as you read it keep this to the front of your mind. Now we have to ask ourselves about the solutions that the prophet gave in his message to all the injustice that he saw. We can only just touch on three simple points, but they are important.

1. Amos called for RIGHT WAYS of life.

There were terrible wrongs perpetrated, so much so that Amos said that the people did not even know how to do right. **(3: 10)** So he calls **"Let justice run down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream"**. **(5: 24)**

For their dishonesty and double-dealing there was one answer - an acceptance of the standards of their God who was right. They should seek good and not evil. More than this - they must hate the evil and love the good and establish justice. **(5: 14)** Stop and think for a moment just how relevant a message this is for today. Every Christian represents a righteous God in a world that is wrong in many ways. We need to consider this carefully.

2. AMOS called for SINCERITY in religion.

Chapter 4: 4-5 give us a picture of how God felt about their hypocrisy. Bethel and Gilgal were just places where the sin of the nation was made all the more evident. There is nothing worse than to offer worship to God which is not genuine. He was worthy of all that was best and right in terms of sacrifices. They were guilty of giving with hearts that were full of evil. Notice the call in **5: 4-6**. God says, **"Seek Me and live."** All the outward forms meant nothing if the Lord was left out. This is a lesson well worth learning because it is easy for us to make the same mistake. Many Christians have fallen into the trap of thinking that as long as the outward rituals of worship are performed, God will be satisfied. But the Lord Jesus wants our whole life, not just the outward form of our worship. **(Romans 12: 1-2)**

3. AMOS offered HOPE to the people.

In **9: 11-15**, he spoke of days when the wrongs would be made right. Instead of the judgments of God, the blessings of the Lord would be given. Instead of famine (the evident of God's anger against their sin), there would be abundant crops and the land would be theirs. The prophecy closes on a very high note. It tells of a time in the far distant future when God's RIGHT VALUES and perfect justice would be established throughout the land.

Study 4

HOSEA - GOD IS LOVE



Hosea Chapters 1-3 & 14: 1-4

If you compare the opening verses of Amos with those of Hosea, you will see that their times overlapped. Hosea was a younger man and his prophecies covered a longer period. In some ways he covers the same ground as Amos because he was dealing with the same evils among the people. The empty worship, godless materialism, corrupt practices and unjust ways of the nation, hurt Hosea just as much as they did the prophet Amos. Yet we are dealing with two completely different personalities and this brings out the wonder of the way in which God speaks and works.

When God takes up someone to use in His service, He does not make them into robots. He always uses their obedience to further His purposes, without destroying the individuality of their character. This is why He needed both Amos and Hosea to relate his message to the people of that day. Amos the rugged herdsman, spoke in his own way. Hosea was a completely different kind of person. He was a family man with a very warm, loving heart. He was a native of Israel and it is obvious that he loved his nation deeply. You will notice how much feeling there is in the words that he speaks. Because of his love for the people he puts all his longing for their repentance and return to God, into the message that he proclaims. It was out of his own experience that he was able to share in the feelings of God's great love for His people, Israel.

HOSEA'S EXPERIENCE.

We do not read of Hosea's call to prophesy. Instead **chapters 1-3** tell of the experience in his life which formed the foundation for his message. He takes, at God's command, a woman named Gomer, out of the nation, and loves her and makes her his wife. It is a simple story of human love. Out of this marriage three children are born. Now if you read carefully, you will notice that in the names of these three children, God gives signs concerning the condition and future of the people - **chapter 1**. (The name Lo-ruhamah means, 'unpitied', or 'showing no mercy'; Lo-ammi means 'not My people'; Ammi means, 'My people'; and Ruhamah means, 'having obtained mercy'.)

But Gomer is unfaithful to Hosea and leaves him to go after other men. She betrays him and breaks his heart with her unfaithfulness. Yet in **chapter 3** we read of Hosea's willingness, at God's command, to take her back again and forgive her for her sinful behaviour. She is restored to his home and again takes up her position as his wife. We can only imagine the sadness that came into Hosea's life because of Gomer's unfaithfulness.

THE PEOPLE'S SIN.

Hosea saw the sin of the people in the light of his own experience. Just as his wife lost her love for him and went

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away from him to commit adultery, so Israel had left God, having lost her love for Him. Israel had really committed spiritual adultery for she had sought out other gods to worship and serve. Hosea also realised that just as he was deeply hurt because of his wife's faithlessness, so God was grieved by the nation He had chosen departing from Him. The language of Hosea is very vivid in places. It tells us of the reality of the prophet's experience, but also of the displeasure of the Lord because of Israel's sin. Let us look at several points in this connection; points which show the nature of the people's sin.

1. Lack of KNOWLEDGE of God.

4: 6&10. *"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge."* It is obvious that this is a self-chosen ignorance of the Lord and His ways.

2. PRIDE,

5: 5. *"And the pride of Israel testifies to His face."* In their arrogance they refused to repent.

3. WORLDLINESS,

7: 8. *"Ephraim (the name Hosea uses for Israel) has mixed himself among the peoples."* This was just what God commanded them not to do. This took them away from God.

4. IDOLATRY,

13: 2. *"Now they sin more and more and have made for themselves moulded images, idols of their silver according to their skill."* Because they failed to worship the true God, they sought out idols and worshipped them.

Remember as you study, that it is just as easy for Christians to commit the same sins as Israel did. We can easily become backsliders!

GOD'S LOVE.

Hosea could speak out of experience concerning his willingness to love beyond the sin of his wife. He was willing to forgive her and have her back again. In a very lovely way he pictures God wanting to do the same for Israel. The love of God is greater and stronger than the failure of His people. There are some great passages in the prophecy that speak of God's loving kindness - His steadfast love. We can learn that the love of God covers the past, present and future, even of a nation that sinned against Him.

In the **PAST**, when in the childhood of national life, God loved Israel like a son, and brought them out of Egypt. (**11: 1-3**)

In the **PRESENT**, God looked at all their wickedness and sinful deeds and loved them so much that He could not give them up. (**11: 8-9**) Notice how God reasons here. He is God and not man. He loved as only God could love.

Yet into the **FUTURE** God does not change, *"I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely"*. (**14: 4**) He calls them to return from their wandering and unfaithfulness and return to Him. There will be forgiveness and restoration whenever they return.

It could well be that Hosea gives the most beautiful message of all the prophets. What is more beautiful than steadfast love? If you read **1 Corinthians 13**, the great 'poem of love' - you will realise that all true love in its fullest meaning comes to us from God Himself.

Questions

Study 1

FROM GOD - TO MAN

1. What are the differences between the Old Testament priest and prophet?
2. To what section of the New Testament can we compare the teaching of the Old Testament prophets, and why?
3. Why were the prophets so important in the life of their nation?
4. How were the people of Israel able to distinguish between the true prophet and the false one?
5. What lesson can we learn from the prophets (as people), that is relevant to us today?

Study 2

ISAIAH - GOD IS HOLY

1. Of what did King Uzziah die and why did this condition come to him?
2. What important truth did Isaiah have to learn?
3. How was Isaiah made clean and how can we be cleansed from sin today?
4. Why is it so important that our lives are pure and holy?
5. Why was Isaiah's experience of God so meaningful, in the light of his mission to the nation?

Study 3

AMOS - GOD IS RIGHTEOUS

1. What kind of conditions did Israel enjoy during the reign of Jeroboam II, and what effect did this have upon the character of the nation?
2. In what year did Samaria go into captivity and why?
3. Give a short background and character-sketch of Amos.
4. What circumstances did God use to make Amos speak out in his day?
5. What were the two main things Amos called for in his message?

Study 4

HOSEA - GOD IS LOVE

1. Give in your own words the story of Hosea and his faithless wife.
2. In what way was Israel's sin like the sin of Gomer?
3. What does idolatry mean?
4. What does backsliding mean and how can it be remedied in our Christian lives?
5. What have you learned about God's love from this lesson?