

Lesson 2

Receiving the Word

Contents

Section 1 Call to Ministry

Section 2 The Ruach of God

Section 3 Three Ways of Receiving

Section 4 Seeing Visions

Section 5 Dreams

Section 6 Hearing the Word

Section 7 The Council of God

Section 8 Assignment

At the end of this lesson, therefore, you should be able to:

1. Understand the prophets call to ministry.
2. Explain the role of The *Ruach* of God in prophecy.
3. Illustrate the three ways of receiving revelation.
4. Give examples of the visions received by the prophets and their value.
5. Discuss the role of dreams as a vehicle of revelation.
6. Give examples of the 'hearing' experiences of the prophets and their value.
7. Explain the expression 'The Council of God' and its importance.

The Call to Ministry

We can learn a lot about the prophets from their own accounts of their call to ministry. Amos tells us that he was ‘neither a prophet nor a prophet’s son, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore fig trees.’ His testimony is that ‘The Lord took me from tending the flock and said to me, “Go, prophesy to my people Israel”’. (Amos 7:14-15). Amos was clearly not a rich man or from a privileged sector of society. His only claim to speak with authority was that God had called him into ministry. His was no easy task since he was a Southerner sent to preach to the northern tribes of Israel where the word that he brought was not only unpopular with the people, it was fiercely opposed by the authorities hence ‘Amaziah said to Amos, “Get out you seer! Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying” ‘ (Amos 7:12).

Jeremiah came from a family of priests but this did not ensure his popularity. In fact his own family plotted to kill him (Jeremiah 11:21). Jeremiah’s testimony is that even before his birth the call of God was upon his life; ‘Before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations’ (Jeremiah 1:5). He confesses to being conscious of his own unworthiness and his fear of being unable to undertake the task to which God was calling him but ‘The Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me now I have put my words in your mouth....’ (1:9).

In a similar manner, Isaiah’s call to ministry began with an overwhelming sense of inadequacy and unworthiness. ‘Woe to me! I cried, I am ruined! for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty’ (Isaiah 6:5). Isaiah testifies that he heard the voice of the Lord calling him and sending him with a message to the people.

Question 1

In each of these three personal testimonies, Amos, Jeremiah and Isaiah, what would you say is the outstanding common characteristic?

.....

The Ruach of God

The Hebrew word *ruach* literally means ‘wind’ or ‘breath’. It is regularly used in the Bible to describe the presence or the power of God. In Judges 6 there is an account of Gideon being called by God to save Israel from the invasion of Midianites and Amalekites and other eastern peoples who invaded the country. After following instructions to tear down the Asherah pole and the altar to Baal Gideon assumed the leadership of several tribes by sending out a message for their fighting men to join him in a united attempt to throw the enemy out of the land. Gideon achieved notoriety as a youthful hothead who outraged the local community by destroying their religious shrine from which he had to be saved by his father from the hostile crowd. His role was suddenly transformed into that of a national leader by what the historian describes as ‘the ruach of the Lord’ coming upon him (Judges 6:34).

When the ‘breath of God’, usually translated ‘Spirit’, came upon a person it enabled them to accomplish superhuman feats because they were endowed with superhuman power. This sometimes gave superhuman strength as in the case of Samson, ‘Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon him in power. He went down to Ashkelon, struck down 30 of their men’ (Judges 14:19).

In other circumstances it was the Ruach of the Lord that spoke through his servants. David acknowledges this when he says ‘The Spirit of the Lord spoke through me; his word was on my tongue’ (2 Samuel 23:2). It was through the Ruach of the Lord being upon the prophets that they were able to declare the word of God with power and authority. This is most clearly expressed by Ezekiel who says ‘Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon me and he told me to say: ‘This is what the Lord says. . .’ (Ezekiel 11:5).

The significance of the breath of God and the life-giving, energising power of the Lord is most vividly illustrated in Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of the dry bones (37:1-14). After the bones had come together and been covered with flesh, so that each body was in perfect order, there was still no life in them until the breath of God was breathed into them when the prophet was commanded, ‘Prophesy to the ruach!’. Then the miracle of life was transmitted to the lifeless bodies through the presence and power of God.

Question 2

In your own words offer a definition of the ‘ruach of God’.

.....

Three Ways of Receiving

In Numbers 12 there is an important statement which summarises the way in which the prophetic word of God was received. The statement arises from a situation where Moses, Aaron and Miriam, the two brothers and their sister, were evidently having a disagreement. Moses, who was said in verse 3 to be a very humble man, was evidently not standing firm and was in danger of losing his authority to his brother and sister and thus the purposes of God for the nation were likely to be diverted. God therefore spoke to them and said ‘When a prophet of the Lord is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses, he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the Lord (6-8).

This statement, attributed to God himself, lists the three ways in which men and women received divine revelation; they were through *visions*, *dreams* and the *spoken word*.

The significance of this statement is that God uses the ordinary senses, with which he has endowed human beings, to communicate with them. We do not have to resort to weird methods of magic and divination practised by those who worship the pagan gods in order to know the mind of God. We do not have to study the entrails of chickens or dance wildly slashing ourselves like the false prophets on Mount Carmel whom Elijah taunted to shout louder! The account in 1 Kings 18:28 says ‘They shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. Midday passed and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time of the evening sacrifice. But there was no response.....’.

It is significant that this futile ecstatic behaviour is described as ‘prophesying’ but of course this was the activity of false prophets. The writing prophets from the 8th century onwards, Isaiah to Malachi, received the word of God either through visions or through hearing God speak to them. At the beginning of each of the books of the prophets there is an indication as to whether the prophet was either mainly a ‘seeing’ or a ‘hearing’ prophet.

Question 3

Which of the prophets were known as seeing prophets and which were mainly hearing prophets? Look at the beginning of each of the writing prophets from Isaiah to Malachi and give the reference with your answer.

.....

Seeing Visions

Ezekiel is the outstanding example of a seeing prophet. He describes the experience which happened when he was living among the exiles in Babylon before the destruction of Jerusalem. He was evidently one of the first wave of exiles removed by Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BC following the surrender of Jerusalem during the reign of Jehoakim one of the sons of Josiah. Ezekiel describes in vivid detail visions that he saw which were obviously quite terrifying and filled him with awe because of the majesty, the glory and the holiness of God.

In Hebraic thought the ‘holiness’ of God was a description of his ‘otherness’ which stood in sharp contrast to the things of this world. God was totally unlike the ordinary ‘everydayness’ of the material created things of the world which, of course, included sinful humanity. The vessels used in the Temple were ‘holy’ in the sense that they were set apart from the ordinary every day utensils used in the kitchen or for regular household use.

It was because the prophet had such a vivid experience of the presence of God that he lay face down prostrate before the Lord and then as the vision faded he heard the voice of the Lord speaking to him (Ezekiel 1:28). Ezekiel’s most famous vision is the valley of the dry bones in Chapter 37 through which God revealed to him his purpose in the restoration of Israel after the tragedy of defeat, the slaughter of the flower of the nation’s youth and the humiliating and cleansing experience of the exile. This would be followed by a resurrection experience. All this was conveyed to the prophet through a vision but which he then had to express in words in order to declare to the nation what had been revealed to him.

Question 4

In your own words, describe what the Bible means by ‘a vision’ or ‘an oracle’.

.....

Dreams

There is no mention anywhere in the canonical prophets of a prophet receiving the word of God through a dream. The only exception to this rule in our Bibles is Daniel and it is significant that the book of Daniel was not regarded as a prophetic writing in ancient Israel. For this reason it is not included among ‘The Prophets’ in the Hebrew Bible (*Nevi'im*) but is included in the third division of the Hebrew Bible, ‘The Writings’ (*Kethubim*). It is linked with Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. The reason for this is that Daniel is apocalyptic literature, that is, it is a coded message written in language deliberately chosen so that it could only be understood by the initiated. If it fell into the hands of the enemy it would not be intelligible. Those who knew the symbolism would be able to interpret the message. The apocalyptic *genre* flourished during the turbulent Inter-testamental period in the absence of the prophetic voice. In the New Testament the book of Revelation is outstanding as the only apocalyptic book and, as such, it has close links with Daniel.

Dreams were often recorded as a means through which the patriarchs received guidance in the earliest days of the history of Israel although it is notable that only Jacob and Joseph are credited with actually receiving dreams, most of the references to dreams are those received by others who were not the servants of God such as

Pharaoh to whom Joseph acted as interpreter. A glance at a concordance will show that none of the prophets refer to dreams as a means of divine revelation with the sole exception of the passing reference in Joel 2:28 about old men dreaming dreams.

Jeremiah specifically links dreams with false prophecy. His references in 23:25 and 23:28 are dismissive, to say the least! The genuine prophets were accustomed to receiving divine revelation whilst their minds were alert and they were fully in control of their senses. The ecstatic prophets were despised and those who claimed to receive pictures or messages whilst they were asleep were clearly not to be trusted. There is no reason given for this in the Bible but it is reasonable to conclude that when we are asleep all kinds of images from our subconscious mind are at work in our dreams (*cf* Ecc 5: 3) and while it is *possible* for God to use this as a means of revelation it is *highly unreliable* because as Jeremiah says, the human heart is ‘deceitful above all things’ (17:9). Num 12:6 implies that dreams are an inferior form of revelation. Deception is much more likely to gain a hold when we are not alert than when we are fully awake and using our mind to weigh what is being conveyed to us and to discern whether or not it is a genuine revelation from God. This is the teaching of the New Testament where Jesus and the apostles urge us to be alert to deception and to test all things (Matthew 7:15f, 1 Thessalonians 5:21, 1 John 4:1f)

Question 5

How did Jeremiah regard dreams? See Jeremiah 23:25-32.

.....

Hearing the Word

By far the most important means of receiving the word of God among the prophets of the Old Testament was directly hearing God communicate his word to them. Jeremiah is the outstanding prophet who heard from God from the time of his call to ministry, as a very young man, through to the time he was forcibly taken to Egypt at the end of his life. He records in 1:4 ‘The word of the Lord came to me....’. The verb translated ‘came to’ literally means ‘was created’ or ‘came into being’ within me.

From this statement we can gain understanding of the way in which the prophet heard the word of God. It was not an external sound like a booming voice in the sky. The prophet heard God speaking to him by the Spirit of God forming the thoughts in his mind. Elijah refers to this as ‘a still small voice’ which came to him in the mountain cave after the thunderous noise and turmoil of the storm which shattered rocks and caused the mountain to quake. God was not in this; but then he heard the word of the Lord quietly communicating to him. (Kings 19:11)

The prophet always had to learn to listen and to recognise the word of God and to know when he was speaking to them. One day Jeremiah, perhaps at his early morning prayers, heard the word of the Lord telling him to go down to the potter’s house. He was told that when he was there God would reveal his word to him and give him a message to declare to the people. It was whilst he was watching the potter at work that the word of the Lord ‘came into being’ within him.

In the prophet that word was so vivid and powerful that it was like a living reality which could not be held in. His own testimony is that he could not withhold the word of God; he experienced a compulsion to speak. ‘If I say I will not mention him or speak anymore in his name, his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot’ (Jeremiah 20:9).

Question 6

How did Ezekiel interpret the visions he saw which are recorded in Ezekiel chapters 1 - 3?

.....
.....

The Council of God

Jeremiah refers to what he calls ‘The council of God’. His dispute with the false prophets culminated in the charge that they had not ‘Stood in the council of the Lord to see or hear his word’ (Jeremiah 23:18). He further declares that God was saying ‘If they had stood in my council, they would have proclaimed my words to my people and would have turned them from their evil ways and from their evil deeds’ (v 22).

For Jeremiah the experience he describes as ‘standing in the council of the Lord’ reflected his own experience of entering into the presence of God. We shall deal at greater length with this when we come to examine the method of the prophet. We have already noted that the major prophets of Israel were not ecstatic. They did not use music or any other aids to induce a state of mind whereby they were able to receive divine revelation.

The prophets learned to discern when God was communicating with them and to distinguish his voice from all other sources of knowledge. No doubt this ability to discern the word of the Lord matured with the age and experience of the prophet but, as we have already noted, it did not depend upon human knowledge or wisdom. Their ability to receive divine revelation depended entirely upon the action of God himself. Both Samuel and Jeremiah were quite young men when they first heard the call of God.

The outstanding characteristic of the prophets was first the call of God upon their lives and secondly their complete and absolute devotion and obedience to God. This enabled them to know how to enter into the presence of the Lord. For Jeremiah this was like having an audience with the King. If the King was in council with his ministers he would be instructing them on the tasks he wished them to carry out or the message he wished to send on an ambassadorial mission to a foreign ruler.

For Jeremiah, entering into the presence of the Lord was like listening to the King of Kings declaring his will and instructing his servant what to say and how to say it. There was nothing automatic or easy about this although it was no doubt part of the prophet’s prayer life. Jeremiah sometimes had to wait for quite a long time before he could be sure that he was rightly hearing the response from the Lord to his request for guidance in far-reaching matters. A good example is in chapter 42 where the people came to Jeremiah after the destruction of Jerusalem when only few of them were left and asked for guidance as to whether they should remain in the land or go to Egypt. Their request was ‘Pray that the Lord your God will tell us where we should go and what we should do’ (v 3). The record states that ‘ten days later the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah’ (v 7).

The prophets were ordinary men and women given an extraordinary job and endowed with extraordinary power to enable them to accomplish it. As James says ‘Elijah was a man just like us’ (James 5:17), but like all the prophets he had learned to ‘stand in the council of God’.

Question 7

What did Jeremiah mean by the phrase ‘standing in the council of God’?

.....
.....

Assignment

Read the following chapters:-

Amos 7; Jeremiah 1; and Isaiah 6. Each of these chapters gives an account of the call of the prophet into the prophetic ministry.

Write an essay of about 600 words on the common characteristics in the call of God; and the reaction of these men as servants of God.

Answers for Lesson 2

1. Each of them ascribes their coming into ministry entirely to the action of God. They did not volunteer; they were called or commanded by God.
2. The *ruach* was the wind or breath of God which symbolised his presence, power and activity in and through human beings.
3. **'The 'Seeing' prophets** were Isaiah (1:1); Ezekiel (1:1); Obadiah (1:1); Nahum (1:1); Habakkuk (1:1). **The 'Hearing' prophets** were Jeremiah (1:2); Hosea (1:1); Joel (1:1); Amos (1:1); Micah (1:1); Zephaniah (1:1); Haggai (1:1); Zechariah (1:1) and Malachi (1:1).
4. A vision or oracle is a vivid picture which was conveyed into the mind of the prophet by the Spirit of God. It was a means through which God revealed to the prophet a spiritual truth which may have been too difficult or too revolutionary to be put in words. It was a vivid visual means of communicating a divine revelation.
5. Jeremiah regarded dreams as a very unreliable means of discerning the word of God. He refers to them as 'delusions of the mind' and contrasts them with the true word of God as straw to grain.
6. The Spirit of God came upon him and spoke to him so that he both saw and heard the word of the Lord.
7. The prophet was speaking about entering the presence of God and receiving his instructions or hearing his plans. The Hebrew word translated 'council' means 'assembly'. Hence a simile would be going to hear the elders of the city or the town council in assembly. When the prophet of God stood in the council of the Lord it was as though God was in council with his messengers.