

Lesson 3

The Characteristics of the Prophets

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Outline

There have been many throughout the centuries who have claimed to bring a prophetic message. The canonical prophets were all individuals who had differing social positions, education and distinct personalities. In this lesson we are noting the basic characteristics which are common to all the prophets. This enables us to gain a better understanding of the ministry of the prophets, of the task to which they were called and the way in which they carried out that calling. We will be focusing upon the eight characteristics which are outstanding in the accounts of their lives and ministries which are recorded in scripture

At the end of this lesson you should be able to;

1. Discuss the role of the prophets as messengers of God and their authentication
2. Describe the life of the prophet under the authority of God

- 3 Give examples of the absolute obedience in the life of the prophet
- 4. Illustrate the total commitment of the prophet
- 5. Understand the quality of compassion in the life and ministry of the prophet
- 6. Explain the quality of patriotism in the life and ministry of the prophet
- 7. Discuss the quality of fearlessness in the life and ministry of the prophet
- 8. Illustrate the role of personal faith in the life of the prophets

Now turn to the text for this lesson; *Prophecy Past and Present*, Chapter 3. Read it through carefully before you begin the lesson.

Messengers of God

All the prophets were conscious of the unique relationship in which they stood to God. It was he who had called them into his service. They were not the servants of men. They were in no-one’s employment. They owed allegiance to no man, either merchant, provincial ruler or king. Even family ties and loyalties to clan or tribe were over-ridden by the demands of being called into the service of God.

Jeremiah had to face fierce opposition from his own family. They even threatened to kill him because his ministry was a threat to their own livelihood as priests (Jeremiah 11:21). But the prophet was undeterred, he could not adjust his message even for the convenience of his own family.

Each of the prophets had a unique sense of the personal call of God to the prophetic ministry and therefore their first and only loyalty was to him. Their experience of the call of God was so awesome that it remained with them throughout their lives. Isaiah and Ezekiel each give a graphic account of the way in which God broke into their lives and called them into his service.

Isaiah’s experience was probably in the temple where he was gazing up at the great carved seraphim; but clearly this was no ordinary esoteric experience and his response was the recognition of his own uncleanness and unworthiness in the presence of the holiness of God. (Isaiah 6:1-5). Similarly, Ezekiel responded to the awesomeness of the presence of God which overwhelmed him. He immediately lay on the ground face downwards and at that moment heard the voice of God speaking to him (Ezekiel 1:28). From that moment he was set apart from other men and called into the service of the living God.

Question 1

In what sense were the prophets not responsible for the message they bore?

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Under Authority

When the prophets spoke they spoke with an authority that was not their own. Even those who bitterly opposed them and hated the message they were hearing recognised that the prophet was speaking with an authority that was derived from a supernatural source.

Of course, the priests did not want to hear such messages as ‘I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings I will not accept them.....(Amos 5:21f). In a similar vein Isaiah said ‘The multitude of your sacrifices -- what are they to me? says the Lord, I have more than enough burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.....’ (Isaiah 1:11f).

When the prophets brought such words they were undermining the authority of the priests, threatening their livelihood and threatening the very foundations of the temple worship which was at the heart of the religion of the nation. Yet the priests did not dare to take really strong measures against the prophets because they recognised the source of their authority was Almighty God. This did not mean that they accepted their admonitions, but simply that they were afraid to act against the men of God whose authority was recognised by the people.

In a similar way the political rulers of the nation hated the words of the prophets. Amos was told to leave Bethel and not to prophesy there anymore ‘Because this is the King’s sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom’ (Amos 7:13). But although anyone else who defied the king’s authority would have soon have been murdered, Amos was made of sterner stuff, and he continued to declare the word of the Lord.

When the prophets spoke they did not speak in their own name, they said ‘This is what the Lord says’ which had a salutary effect upon their hearers. To touch the prophet would be to lay hands upon God himself. The prophets as messengers of God were believed not only to be speaking in the name of God but also to possess his power, so that their words were communicated with divine authority.

Question 2

What was the mark of authority that was common to all the prophets in the way they spoke?

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Absolute Obedience

There are many examples in the Bible of the obedience of the prophets. Their greatest desire was to obey the Lord who had called them into his service.

An incident occurred early in the period of the monarchy, soon after Solomon’s son Rehoboam had seen the kingdom of his father split in two, with Jeroboam usurping the throne in the Northern Kingdom. At that stage Samaria was not yet established as the religious and political centre of Israel and, as Jerusalem would have been shut to the rebel king and his followers, they were using Bethel as the place of worship.

Bethel was an old Canaanite high place which, since the early days of the settlement under Joshua, had also been used by the Israelites as a place of worship. Once the temple had been built by Solomon in Jerusalem the sacrificial system, and thereby the official worship of the nation, had been centred in Jerusalem. Elaborate plans for this had been formulated during David’s reign; they are recorded in 1 Chronicles 22:26 with lists of hundreds of names of those who were to minister in the temple in various ways. This elaborate organisation was designed to concentrate worship in Jerusalem as part of David’s and Solomon’s plans for establishing and strengthening national unity.

Jeroboam's act of making an offering on the altar at Bethel (1 Kings 13:1) was a clear act of rebellion which had both religious and political significance and which no doubt outraged the whole population of Jerusalem. It prompted a young prophet to walk the short distance to Bethel, only about 5 or 6 miles north of Jerusalem, and denounce the altar in the name of the Lord. His testimony was that God had told him to do this and that he was neither to eat nor drink on the journey and that he was to take a different route home. Since it should only have taken him some two or three hours each way this was not unreasonable. He successfully carried out his mission refusing the king’s hospitality but was tricked by an old prophet to do the very thing God had commanded him not to do and he suffered the fatal consequences.

This incident, occurring right at the beginning of the history of the separate nations of Israel and Judah at the time when the ministry of the prophet was just becoming established, was a salutary reminder to all who might aspire to this ministry that the Lord demanded absolute obedience from those whom he called into his service. This incident which occurred some 200 years before the time of Isaiah would have put the fear of God into any aspiring prophet and was no doubt a major deterrent guarding the nation from a flood of false prophets.

Question 3

In the account of the unnamed prophet in 1 Kings 13; why was his punishment so severe that he even lost his life?

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Total Commitment

All the prophets were courageous in facing opposition to the message they proclaimed in the name of the Lord. A major part of their task was to call people back to trust in God which inevitably meant that they found themselves in opposition to the general drift of life or to the deliberate policies being pursued by leaders in both social and religious spheres.

It is clear from the accounts of the call to the prophetic ministry of major prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel that each of them was conscious from the very beginning of being called to a difficult task in which they would encounter strong opposition. Jeremiah (1:10) was given a six-fold task, of which four were negative and two were positive -- to uproot, tear down, destroy and overthrow; as well as to build and to plant.

The prophets knew that they were being sent to a ‘rebellious people’ (Ezekiel 2:0) who would not want to be reminded of how far they had strayed away from the terms of the covenant which had been made with their forefathers and which was still an obligation upon them. Jeremiah (11:1-13) was told to remind the people of the terms of the covenant which they had broken, the penalty for which was to bring a range of curses upon them. From the beginning of his ministry, however, Jeremiah was aware that the message would stir up fierce opposition. At the time of his call to ministry he was told by the Lord, ‘Stand up and say to them whatever I command you. Do not be terrified by them or I will terrify you before them.... they will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you, declares the Lord’. (Jeremiah 1 17:19).

It was because the prophets were men of integrity who were totally committed to carrying out the commission given to them to speak the word of the Lord to the nation that they showed such fortitude in the face of opposition and personal danger.

The fact that the prophets were totally committed to the work of the Lord does not mean to say that they were shielded from personal suffering. The most vivid account of any of the prophets' inner conflicts is recorded by Jeremiah who actually reached such a low point of depression that he even wished he had never been born 'Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame', he cried, (Jeremiah 20 7:18). But this did not stop him from faithfully carrying out his ministry. He had just been put into the stocks, publicly humiliated and beaten, but when King Zedekiah sent asking the prophet to pray to the Lord for a miracle which would overthrow the Babylonians, Jeremiah still sent back the same defiant message from the Lord. He said that God, himself, would fight against the unrighteous King and the rebellious nation (21:5).

Question 4

Can you give an example of a prophet whose commitment wavered but then returned?

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Compassion

All the prophets were aware of the compassionate nature of God. It was God himself who had revealed his own nature as compassionate and merciful, loving, faithful and forgiving. He made this self-revelation to Moses proclaiming, 'The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin'. (Exodus 34:6).

Hosea speaks a great deal about the love and compassion of God, his tender concern for those who bring trouble upon themselves by being disobedient and turning away from the paths of righteousness. Hosea saw God as longing to forgive and to restore his people. Just as he himself had experienced compassion and a longing to restore his own wife to a close and loving relationship with himself so he saw God as longing to embrace his children who had turned away from him.

All the prophets were aware of God's compassion and it was this awareness that drove them to keep on calling for repentance even when the national situation appeared disastrous. They knew that God wanted to forgive and to restore the nation to a right relationship with himself. It was part of God's very nature to forgive and to redeem and it was awareness of the compassionate nature of God that drove the prophets themselves to show compassion even when proclaiming a harsh message. The prophets always had to live their message and not simply proclaim it as a cold, intellectual, ethical exercise. It was a living message from a living God who lived within them. The message was so powerfully real that they could not hold it in as Jeremiah once confessed in one of his passionate outbursts (Jeremiah 20:9).

There are many references in the writings of the prophets to the compassion of God and it is worth consulting a concordance to see the significance of these references as an integral part of the message of the prophets such as Isaiah 49 10:15) which clearly was a reflection of the prophet's own tender, compassionate heart for the suffering of his people. Ezekiel, at the beginning of his ministry, had been told to eat the word (3:1) which meant that the prophet imbibed the word of the Lord. This was true of all the prophets as the Word of God became a part of their very nature.

Question 5

Amos is generally regarded as the sternest among the prophets. Is there anything in the book of Amos that reveals the deep compassion in the heart of the prophet?

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Patriotism

Patriotism needs to be carefully distinguished from nationalism. Nationalism is an evil, destructive spirit, self-centred and blind to the realities of either the national or the international situation. Nationalism values only the narrow self-interest of one's own nation and cares little for those of other nations.

Patriotism, on the other hand, is a genuine love for one's own nation, but far from this blinding the patriot to the faults of the nation, his or her greatest desire is for the good of the nation. If the patriot sees trends in the life of the nation which will inevitably lead to disaster, such as family breakdown, injustice and oppression of the poor, or blind self-interest but disregards the rights of neighbouring states -- then the patriot has to speak up in order that these wrongs may be righted and the nation may be steered into paths of righteousness which will bring joy and blessing to its citizens.

All the prophets were patriots. They loved the land and the people, but they saw their own love as a reflection of God's love. He had chosen that land and he had called its people into a covenant relationship with himself. The prophets not only felt an identity with the people but also with the land. They often spoke to the mountains, or to the

hills, or to the valleys, or the streams because they were part of God's handiwork, his beautiful creation which God himself loved and therefore the prophets loved.

The song of the vineyard in Isaiah 5 reflects God's great love for his creation. It is in the form of a song which the prophet sang in the streets of Jerusalem. In the Hebrew it is rhyming verse and was probably delivered with the aid of a musical instrument, the prophet singing solo, possibly in the form of what today is known as 'rap'. Isaiah would have attracted a large crowd around him who were all quite knowledgeable about vineyards so he puts the question 'What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it?' At this point he had all the crowd on his side recognising the loving care lavished upon the vineyard by its owner and his great disappointment when it only yielded bad grapes. They could even understand his intention to remove the hedge and destroy his own precious vineyard. It no doubt came as a terrible shock when the prophet suddenly turned the whole thing around and showed the people that he was talking about them! They were the vineyard that did not produce good fruit despite the loving compassion of God who lavished upon them all his precious gifts.

Question 6

How would you defend Jeremiah from the charge of being unpatriotic in the light of his statement in 21:8-10.

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Fearlessness

The prophets were often exhorted by the Lord not to be afraid but that he would be with them and strengthen them. Jeremiah was told (1:18) that God was making him like ‘A fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land’. Ezekiel was told ‘I will make your forehead like the hardest stone, harder than flint. Do not be afraid of them or terrified by them though they are a rebellious house’ (Ezekiel 3:9).

If they were to do the task to which God had called them and actually confront rulers, rich merchants, irate priests and rebellious people in the name of the Lord they had to be very courageous. The secret of course was in their knowledge that God was with them so that they were not acting in their own strength or trying to make statements with mere human authority. As we have already noted, the prophets were conscious of being messengers of God and therefore as acting as his mouthpiece. This was an awesome task but it had the effect of making them utterly unafraid in the face of the fiercest opposition. Perhaps we should qualify that statement and say that even at such times as the prophets quaked because of the fierce opposition to their message their human fear was subjugated to the all-empowering Spirit of the Lord within them.

There are many instances of the prophets facing danger although there are very few instances of the prophets actually being murdered. There is a lengthy marginal note inserted into the text of Jeremiah, at sometime later by an editor, which appears in 26:20-23. It gives an account of a prophet named Uriah who evidently prophesied against Jerusalem in similar terms to that of Jeremiah, and at the same time, but when he came up against severe opposition that threatened his own life he ran away. King Jehoakim, however, had an extradition treaty with Egypt and had him brought back and executed.

Question 7

From the account in Jeremiah 26, how do you account for the fact that Jehoakim executed Uriah but spared Jeremiah?

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Faith

Without faith the prophets could not have carried out their ministries. Indeed their work can only be understood in the context of absolute and overwhelming faith in God. He was more real to them than anything else in life. In the magnificent chapter 11 of Hebrews the writer speaks of the faith of the patriarchs and the judges and the prophets who ‘Quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength.....some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawn in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and ill-treated -- the world was not worthy of them.These were all commended for their faith’ (Hebrews 11:34-39).

Faith was the key. Faith was the starting point of ministry. Faith gave them the confidence to move forward under the conviction that God had called them and that he was able to do all things. Paul witnessed to this and made the definitive statement that God is able ‘to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine according to his power that is at work within us’ (Ephesians 3:20).

This faith at work in the prophets is nowhere to be seen more clearly than in the great confrontation which took place on Mount Carmel when the prophet Elijah stood alone to face the might of the king and his army, plus 850 false prophets, and a vast crowd of surly people who were suffering from several years of famine and who were prepared to worship any god who would give them bread!

Elijah was so confident in the God in whom he had put his trust that he even taunted the prophets of Baal urging them to 'shout louder!'. When they were unable to get fire to come down from heaven onto their altar of sacrifice Elijah calmly arranged 12 stones for a simple altar. This was significant since the northern kingdom was composed only of ten tribes but Elijah recognised no such split between Israel and Judah. Having doused the wood for the sacrifice with water, which after a prolonged drought can only have come from a deep well on the northern flank of Carmel (which is still there today). Then at the time of the evening sacrifice the prophet stood alone with all eyes upon him and quietly prayed in the confidence that he had learned from his personal knowledge of God.

Then, when the fire fell, it not only burnt up the sacrifice and the wood, but even the stones and the soil were burnt, so intense was the fire of the Lord. Elijah's faith in God was rewarded when all the people fell prostrate and cried 'The Lord, The Lord - He is God!' (1 Kings 18:1-39).

Question 8

How did the prophets gain such outstanding faith in God?

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Assignment

Read 2 Chronicles 18 1-27 and recount in your own words the story of Micaiah being brought before Jehosaphat and Ahab bringing out the significance of Micaiah's statement in verse 13 'As surely as the Lord lives, I can tell him only what my God says'.

Answers for Lesson 3

1. The prophets did not offer their own opinion; they declared the word of God. The message was therefore not their's but God's.
2. They all spoke in the name of the Lord.
3. The young prophet was unable to discern when he was being deceived. It is essential that the prophet should know the difference between the Spirit of God speaking to him and evil or lying spirits. Lack of discernment disqualified him as a servant of God and made him a dangerous liability.
4. Good examples are Elijah running away from Jezebel and Jonah running away from Assyria. In Chapter 7:1-8 the prophet is shown a series of three visions which drive him to prayer in which he pleads earnestly with the Lord to spare the nation with the words 'How can Jacob survive? he is so small!'. This shows how deeply Amos cared.
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6. After many years of seeing his warnings ignored Jeremiah knew that there was now no hope of saving the city from destruction. God would actually use the Babylonians as the instrument of judgment upon his rebellious people hence his statement in verse 5 that God himself would fight against the nation.
7. In running away in the face of danger Uriah probably cast doubt upon his own prophetic calling so that Jehoakim had no fear of him whereas he hesitated to kill Jeremiah whom everyone recognised as a prophet of God.
8. It stemmed from the time of their call to ministry and from their personal experience of the presence and power of the Lord in their own lives and ministries.