

Lesson 5

Interpreting the Signs

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

1. Understand the significance of signs and symbols for the prophetic ministry.
2. Explain how the prophets used natural events as a means of interpreting the Word of God.
3. Show how the prophets used man-made events in their ministries.
4. Show an understanding of the way the prophets were used to reveal the nature and purposes of God.
5. Illustrate from scripture God's activity both in the history of Israel and of the nations.

Introduction

This is an important lesson because what we are dealing with here is the very core of the prophetic ministry. The prophets had to learn to interpret the signs of the times. They were no use to the nation if they could not do this accurately. It was not a ministry of speculation dealing with human prognosis but that of discerning what God was doing in the world.

All the prophets had a strong sense of God's sovereign control over history. He was not merely a territorial God like the Baals who were each supposed to exercise jurisdiction over a piece of land. Yahweh was the eternal God, the creator of all things, who held the nations in his hands as a drop in a bucket (Isaiah 40: 15). 'Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? ... before him all the nations are as nothing ... he stretches out the heavens like a canopy ... he brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing' (Isaiah 40: 12, 17, 22-23).

It was statements like this declaring the majesty, might and everlasting power of the Almighty God that formed the background to the thinking of the prophets of Israel from the eighth century onwards. This universalism was the background to the particularism of Yahweh's special covenant relationship with Israel. Although he was in charge of the destinies of the nations he had a particular purpose for Israel. It was, therefore, particularly the prophets' task not only to remind the nation of the terms of that covenant relationship but actually to give guidance for its contemporary outworking.

This meant that the prophets had to be aware of International events as well as internal affairs within the nation, particularly those relating to the moral and spiritual health and well-being of the people. If the latter was corrupt the economic, political and social life of the nation would also suffer. But more importantly the nation would be in danger of putting itself outside the covering protection of the Lord by breaking the terms of the covenant. This put the very existence of the nation at risk. Hence it was of the greatest significance that the prophets should learn to understand and interpret the signs of the times.

Relationship with God

In earlier lessons we have stressed the importance of the prophets' personal relationship with God. This cannot be over emphasised. It is the foundation of the prophetic ministry and formed the base line from which the prophets drew their understanding of the nature of God himself. It was from their understanding of the nature of God that the prophets drew their understanding of the purposes of God.

The personal relationship between God and the prophet is well illustrated in the call of Jeremiah recorded in Chapter 1. Before going any farther, you should pause at this point and read Jeremiah Chapter 1.

Keep Jeremiah Chapter 1 open in front of you. Notice the standard features of the call of the prophet which include :

Divine initiative (v 5)

Human resistance (v 6)

Rebuke and reassurance (v7-8)

Physical act of commissioning (v 9a)

Substance of commission (vv 9b-10).

The key word is verse 10 which sets out the entire theme for the book of Jeremiah. The six verbs, four negative and two positive, show the balance of the ministry which the prophet is called upon to exercise. The two visions of verses 11 - 16 are not simply scene setters illustrating the effect in the nation which will be worked out historically through the ministry of the prophet, they are more importantly a declaration of God's sovereign power over the whole historical process. God reveals himself to the prophet as the one who is watching over the nations and determining the course of human history (v 12).

The call of the prophet is confirmed in verses 17 to 19 with the exhortation to get ready for the tremendous demands of this ministry. The prophet is called upon to dress for combat. He is given no guarantee of success, only the promise that God would be with him throughout his ministry. He is told that he is going to be one man against the whole nation including kings, officials, priests and people with no guarantee of success simply the promise that God would rescue him when he got into life threatening situations.

Although there was no promise of success there was a promise concerning the consequences of failure (v 17). If the prophet weakened and gave way to fear God would not merely desert him but cause him to be utterly humiliated in front of his enemies. It is small wonder that later on Jeremiah was to rue the day of his birth (20: 14). Yet it was this personal experience of God in his life which became the foundation of the prophet's ministry. He knew God to be one who kept his word. Having once declared his word, God was faithful and had the power as well as the integrity to fulfil it. Without such a personal knowledge of God neither Jeremiah nor any of the prophets could have fulfilled their ministries.

Question 1

Using Isaiah 6, illustrate the features in Isaiah's call to ministry which are similar to those we have noted in Jeremiah 1: 5-10.

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Signs and Symbols

The prophets dealt a great deal in signs and symbols. As the parable was to Jesus so signs and symbols were to the prophets. They often acted out a piece of drama which had prophetic significance for those who had eyes to see and ears to hear, much in the same way as Jesus told stories each of which had a spiritual significance.

Just as Jesus used every day stories which were part of the routine experience of the ordinary people out of which he drew his teaching, in the same way the prophets used every day events to bring home their message.

Jeremiah's use of the two baskets of figs (24: 1) is a good example of the way the prophets went about their ordinary everyday lives with a readiness to perceive the significance of anything which the Lord brought to their attention. No doubt the prophet saw a street trader with baskets of figs near the entrance to the temple but he ascribes the experience to the Lord. He says 'The Lord showed me two baskets of figs ...' thus an ordinary everyday event was suddenly transformed into 'a sign'.

For the prophets a sign was a material object or an event which had spiritual significance.

Jeremiah may simply have been idly contemplating the baskets of figs, or he may even have been considering making a purchase when he noticed the contrast between the two baskets and suddenly he felt a leap within his spirit and he knew that God was communicating something to him. As he examined the figs more closely he felt the Lord showing him the spiritual significance of what he was seeing with his physical eyes. Here was a sign symbolising the two communities of Judah, the one in exile in Babylon and the other still in Jerusalem. The exiled community was suffering but was being

and was soon to suffer the full judgment of God descending upon them.

The prophets also used material objects as symbols through which they communicated the word of God to the people. A good example is in Jeremiah 19 where the prophet was instructed by the Lord to 'go and buy a clay jar from a potter'. He was then instructed to take some of the elders of the people and the priests and to go out into the valley of Ben Hinnom. There he had to smash the jar and in their presence say 'this is what the Lord Almighty says, I will smash this nation and this city just as this potter's jar is smashed and cannot be repaired' (19: 10). The potter's jar thus symbolised the city. Its fate became a little enacted parable of the fate awaiting not only the city of Jerusalem but the whole nation of Judah.

A sign was thus an object or an event to which the prophet's attention was drawn and which God used in order to convey a message to the prophet.

A symbol was a material object which the prophet himself took and used to convey a message to the people.

Basically then, signs conveyed a message from God to the prophet whereas symbols conveyed a message from the prophet to the people.

Question 2

Find an example in any of the prophets of 'a sign' and 'a symbol'.

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Interpreting Natural Events

All the prophets used natural events as part of the means by which they conveyed the word of God to the people. In fact, people regularly turned to the prophets for their interpretation of contemporary events. This was considered to be a major part of the task of the prophets. They were consulted not only about things to do with nature such as seedtime and harvest but about the rightness of going to war. As for example, the account of Ahab and Jehosaphat preparing to go to war against Syria (1 Kings 22).

Natural events are referred to throughout the Old Testament as the 'deeds of the Lord'. There are numerous references in the Psalms to the awesome deeds of God. These references are usually to be interpreted as occurrences in nature such as storms, earthquakes or famines, droughts or plagues. In one of his prayers Moses said 'What God is there in heaven or on earth who can do the deeds and mighty works you do?' (Deut 3: 24). Again in Deut 5: 34 he refers to the 'great and awesome deeds' of God.

These awesome deeds of God were often seen by the prophets as signs from God which had a spiritual significance which they interpreted to the people. They were the means of conveying the word of God to his people. God withheld the spring rains and caused the seed not to germinate. Jeremiah interpreted this as a warning sign from God. But the people did not respond to correction. See Jeremiah 3: 2-3, 2: 30 and 5: 3.

In a similar way Amos used events that everyone must have been discussing to give the word of God to the people. See Amos 4: 6-12. Here the prophet used drought, famine, blight, plague and other natural disaster to illustrate the warnings God was sending to the nation.

The classic example of interpreting natural events was that which occurred earlier in Ahab's lifetime in his confrontation with the prophet Elijah whom he blamed for the prolonged drought. Elijah countered by saying that he was not the cause

with the prophet Elijah whom he blamed for the prolonged drought. Elijah countered by saying that he was not the cause of the drought, he was only God's instrument punishing the nation because of the sins of the king. 'I have not made trouble for Israel, Elijah replied. But you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the Lord's commands and have followed the Baals' (1 Kings 18: 18).

Drought, crop disease, swarms of locusts or the failure of harvests were all natural events which were given a spiritual interpretation by the prophets. They saw them as direct signs of God's displeasure with the nation and they used them to call the people back to obedience in accordance with the terms of the covenant.

Question 3

Give an example in any of the prophets of the use of a natural event to bring the word of God to the people.

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Interpreting Man-made Events

The loss of a battle in time of war or some other form of national reverse were the kind of events which the prophets took before the Lord for his interpretation. There are numerous examples throughout the prophets of this kind of activity. Isaiah began his ministry at a time of great international turmoil when the nation was already suffering at the hands of enemy action.

Your country is desolate, your cities burned with fire; your fields are being stripped by foreigners right before you, laid waste as when overthrown by strangers (1: 7).

This gave the prophet the opportunity to interpret these events with a forthright declaration of the sinfulness of the nation; 'Ah sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evil doers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the Lord, they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him' (1: 4).

From this eighth century prophecy right down to the post-exilic period of the return of the exiles during the ministry of Haggai (about 520 BC) there are numerous examples of prophets interpreting man-made events. Haggai's classic declaration still has a contemporary ring and relevance for our own generation,

Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it (Haggai 1: 6).

The prophet was called to be the watchman of the nation 'Son of Man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me' (Ezekiel 33: 7). The watchman's task was simply to watch and to interpret what he saw. Of course, his task was basically to warn of forthcoming danger. In times of peace nobody needed a watchman. That's why you never find the prophets foretelling times of peace and prosperity.

Nobody needed a prophet to tell them to get ready to rejoice because they were going to receive a bumper harvest! When it happened there would be no stopping the rejoicing of the people! The prophet's task was to warn of danger, not to encourage complacency and idleness. They were held accountable before God if they did not bring warning in time for the people to repent, turn away from their wicked ways and avoid the disaster which was threatened. Basically this has always been the essence of the prophetic task.

Question 4

Give an example in any of the prophets of the use of a man-made event to bring the word of God to the people.

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Understanding God's Nature and Purposes

The prophets were steeped in the history of Israel. The covenant established between God and the nation at the time of Moses was the baseline from which all the prophets worked. Israel had voluntarily entered into a covenant relationship with God and therefore they were under an obligation to observe the terms of that covenant. Jeremiah insists upon this throughout his ministry. He reminds the people that when God brought their forefathers out of Egypt he did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices but he gave them this command 'Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in all the ways I command you, that it may go well with you' (Jeremiah 7: 23). This was the basis of the covenant; all the rest, the rules and regulations, were an elaboration of the covenant.

From the history of Israel, which was a record of God's dealings with the nation, the prophets learned that God was a God of faithfulness who kept his word under all circumstances. They realised that even when Israel was faithless God would remain faithful hence they could call for repentance and turning to God, knowing that the Lord would forgive and restore his people to a right relationship with himself.

The prophets also learned that God was a God of justice and righteousness. His ways were not arbitrary like those of the Baals who were capricious gods. You never quite knew how they would react or what they would do hence Elijah teased the false prophets on Mount Carmel. At the same time he knew with absolute confidence that when the time came for him to call upon the Lord there would be an answer. If God had promised to send fire upon the altar he would do so, for he was a God of his word.

God was a God of justice who hated injustice, The Lord Almighty will be exalted by his justice, and the Holy God will show himself holy by his righteousness (Isaiah 5: 16).

From this understanding of the nature of God, rooted in righteousness and justice, the prophets were able to declare that God would not defend an unholy nation, a nation full of injustice and corruption. Hence Isaiah was able to say 'Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness ... who acquit the guilty for a bribe and deny justice to the innocent ... they have rejected the law of the Lord Almighty and spurned the word of the Holy one of Israel. Therefore the Lord's anger burns against his people' (Isaiah 5: 20-25).

When the prophets saw evil in the life of the nation they knew that God was angry with his people. Although it was God's nature to have mercy and to forgive, his own integrity demanded that he should remain true to his own nature. Therefore if the people wilfully disobeyed the terms of the covenant he had to remove the covering of his protection from over the nation.

One of the most awesome scenes in the whole of the Bible is the account given by Ezekiel of God's presence departing from the Temple shortly before the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians (Ezekiel 10). Ezekiel had a strong sense of the holiness of God; it was therefore impossible for the presence of God to remain in the city which was so contaminated by sin and was shortly to be overrun and defiled by men who, although the instruments of his wrath, were nevertheless utterly wicked and abhorrent to God.

The message which runs right through the prophets is that God who is holy would not defend an unholy nation. It is essential to remember that in the parlance of the prophets holiness is always 'separation'. The holiness of God was the mark of his separation from the world - his total 'otherness' in terms of the materialistic world of humanity. Israel was called to be different from the nations, to be separated from worldly, or materialistic pursuits. Contact with the nations was always contaminating and had to be atoned for before they could enter into the presence of the Holy One of Israel.

It is this concept of holiness and separation from the world that constantly filled the prophets with a sense of awe as they sought to enter the presence of God. It brought upon them the 'fear of the Lord' as they sought to be obedient to his word and not to defile his presence by contaminating his word or misinterpreting the task to which they were called.

Question 5

Give an example from any of the prophets of their use of historical events to illustrate God's nature and purposes.

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The God of History

When Israel sinned they broke the covenant. When they broke the covenant with God the consequences were that they brought suffering upon themselves. The whole history of Israel has to be seen in this context.

Associated with the covenant were both blessings and curses. There were promises of blessing which would follow as a natural consequence from being in a right relationship with God through obedience to the terms of the covenant. On the other hand, by contrast, there were curses which came upon the people as a result of disobedience. In Jeremiah 11 this is spelt out 'Cursed is the man who does not obey the terms of this covenant - the terms I commanded your forefathers when I brought them out of Egypt, out of the iron smelting furnace. I said, obey me and do everything I command you, and you will be my people, and I will be your God.' The prophet then used this as the basis for a review of the history of Israel. It was a fact that the people had not listened or paid attention (v 8) and because of stubbornness of their hearts they had brought upon themselves all the curses of the covenant and they were heading for a disaster from which they could not escape (v 11).

The prophets had such a strong sense of God being in control of all history that they were able to see his hand even in the disasters that befell the nation. Whereas others saw international forces and the rise and fall of empires the prophets simply saw God working out his purposes among the nations. They saw him using even wicked nations as instruments of his purposes. The Assyrians were the rod of his anger (Isaiah 10: 5) but in due time he would raise up the Babylonians to overthrow the Assyrians.

Then later as part of his purpose, once the exile had done its cleansing work, God would raise up Cyrus the Persian whom Isaiah actually dared to call 'the anointed one of the Lord' (45: 1). This must have been an outrageous statement causing uproar among the priests but the prophet argued 'Woe to him who quarrels with his maker ... does the clay say to the potter, what are you making? ... do you question me about my children, or give me orders about the work of my hands? ... I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness; I will make all his ways straight. He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free but not for a price or reward, says the Lord Almighty' (Isaiah 45: 9 - 13). It was this tremendous sense of the almighty power of God overshadowing not only the whole of the created natural order but over the lives of individuals and nations which was the background to the ministry of the prophets.

This sense of God being in control of everything has remained with the Jews throughout their history. There is a noticeable difference between Jewish literature written for Gentile consumption and that written for themselves. In Jewish writings concerning the 20th century holocaust they are fierce in their condemnation of the Nazis. But it is noticeable that in Jewish writings for internal consumption there is seldom a hint of blame of the Gentile nations - only of their own sinfulness.

When disaster comes the Jews always blame themselves. They see the way in which their own sinfulness has made them abhorrent to God so that he abandoned them to the consequences of their own evil doing. They therefore see that they had no one to blame but themselves.

The God of history is also a God of righteousness who called his people Israel to be a light unto the Gentiles (Isaiah 49: 6). They were to be the nation through whom he would reveal his nature and purposes to the world. This is the burden the Hebrew people have carried since the time of Moses.

Question 6

Give an example in any of the prophets of their revelation of God as the one who is in control of history.

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Assignment

Using Amos 4: 6-12, write an essay of not more than 1,000 words on 'The prophet's use of contemporary events to bring the word of God to the nation'.

Answers for Lesson 5

1. Divine initiative (vv 1-4); Human resistance (v 5); Reassurance (vv 6-7); commissioning (v8); Substance of commission (vv 9-10).
2. There are many examples of signs and symbols in the writings of the prophets, eg 'sign' - Isaiah 7: 10-14; 'symbol' - Jeremiah 13:1.
3. There are many examples in the prophets of their interpreting natural events such as Jeremiah 3: 2-3 where he says the spring rains have not fallen because of the idolatry of the people.
4. There are many examples in the prophets of their interpreting man-made events such as Isaiah 1: 4-9 where the prophet relates the invasion of the land to the spiritual rebellion of the people.
5. Hosea 11: 1-4 where the prophet refers to God's action in redeeming the nation from slavery in Egypt which showed his love and kindness.
6. Isaiah 5: 25b-30 where the prophet sees God summoning nations from the ends of the earth to come and do his bidding and bring judgment upon his own rebellious people Israel.