

## Lesson 7

### The Prophet at Prayer

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

1. Understand the significance of prayer in the ministry of the prophet.
2. Be able to describe the place of intercession within the ministry of the prophet.
3. Be familiar with the patriotism of the prophets and how this influenced their intercession.
4. Be able to describe the method by which the prophets learned to understand the ways of the Lord.
5. Be familiar with the concept of 'praying into being' the will of God.
6. Understand the prophetic approach to seeking guidance.
7. Be familiar with the prophets' understanding of God's judgment and their responsibility as intercessors for the nation.

## Introduction

Prayer was tremendously important to the prophets. It was their lifeline which enabled them to be in communication with God. Each of them no doubt had their own particular method of entering the presence of God or what Jeremiah called standing in the 'council of the Lord to see or to hear his word' (Jeremiah 23: 18).

You can often tell more about a person's spiritual life by listening to a few minutes of them praying than you could gain from an hour or two of conversation. The few snatches of prayer which we have recorded in the prophetic writings are very revealing for our understanding of the spiritual life of the prophets and their relationship with God. In addition to praise and adoration the prophets regularly recounted the deeds of the Lord. This they also did when speaking to the people, reminding them of what God had done in the past. Often prayer flowed naturally into prophecy as the prophet entered the throne room of the Lord and began to hear the response to intercession or petition. Isaiah 26 is a good example of the mixture of prayer and prophecy. Sometimes it is quite hard to distinguish one from the other as, for example, verses 3 and 4; 'you will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you.' This is clearly addressed to the Lord but the next statement is directed towards the people 'trust in the Lord for ever...'

Prayer was an integral part of the prophetic ministry. It was the means whereby the prophet maintained communication with God and ensured that he was rightly exercising the commission to be the mouthpiece of the Lord and only to declare what he was hearing from God. In this lesson we shall be examining some of the ways in which the prophets prayed and the importance of prayer in their ministries.

## Intercession

Throughout the Old Testament we find that intercessory prayer was the task of leadership, both secular and religious. Both the **monarchy** and the **priesthood** were hereditary offices. They were, nevertheless, both regarded as divine appointments. As such they were responsible to God and accountable for the right exercise of their functions within the nation. The office of **prophet** was not hereditary but it was a divine appointment and therefore carried divine accountability.

From the time of Moses the prophet was regarded as one who not only enjoyed an intimate relationship with God but who also had the responsibility of being an intercessor for the nation. Beginning with Moses the prophets were regarded as the chief intercessors for the people. When things went wrong in a community or in the life of the nation the people would exhort the prophet to pray for them. A good example is in Numbers 21: 7 where the people were being bitten by snakes; 'the people came to Moses and said, "we sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take away the snakes from us." So Moses prayed for the people.'

A Godly king would also lead the people in prayer as for example in the time of Jehosaphat when a united army came against him the King called an assembly of the whole tribe of Judah meeting in Jerusalem and led them in prayer which concluded 'for we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you' (2 Chronicles 20: 12). Similarly there are many examples of David and Solomon leading in prayer and other Godly monarchs such as Hezekiah and Josiah.

The prophets, however, were always regarded by the people as the chief intercessors for the nation because of their special relationship with God and their understanding of his nature and purposes. Perhaps the greatest example of the power of prayer is when a Godly king and a great prophet joined together in intercession. 2 Chronicles 32: 20 records 'King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah son of Amos cried out in prayer to heaven about this.' Their prayer was wonderfully answered and through a divine intervention the city was saved from the Assyrian invaders.

## Question 1

Why did the people ask the prophet Samuel to intercede on their behalf? (1 Samuel 12:19)

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## Praying for the Nation

All the prophets grieved over the state of the nation. They were called to speak the word of the Lord which, for many of them, was a dangerous as well as an onerous task. We have already noted that God raised up prophets in times of crisis. Their primary task was to declare the word of the Lord to a rebellious generation and their primary commitment was loyalty to God.

The starting point of ministry for the prophets was the covenant relationship between God and the people of Israel - of all the tribes who trace their common decent from Jacob. It was their consciousness of the way in which the nation had broken the covenant with God through unfaithfulness to his clear commandments that caused the prophets such grief. Despite the unfaithfulness of the people, the prophets knew God to be faithful. He, himself, would never break his covenant with Israel and he was always ready to forgive and to restore the people to that right relationship with himself.

The prophets knew that it was only as the nation took seriously their responsibility to obey the commands of the Lord that they would be able to enjoy his blessings and to come under his protection. All the great eighth century prophets warned the nation of the dire consequences of putting themselves outside the protection of the Lord at a time of international threat from the rising power of Assyria. A century later Jeremiah perceived the same danger from Babylon and warned that God who is a righteous God would not protect an unrighteous people. Even though the city of Jerusalem bore his name and was dear to him he would not protect it so long as it was full of false religion, injustice, oppression, violence idolatry and immorality - see the six sins of Jerusalem listed in Jeremiah's temple sermon in chapter 7: 1-11.

Jeremiah grieved deeply because he could foresee the coming disaster and he knew it to be the fault of the people themselves which would bring the tragedy. It was not the military might of Babylon but the sinfulness of the people which was the real threat to Jerusalem. Hence his statement in 4: 18-22 which begins 'your own conduct and actions have brought this upon you' Jeremiah said that his heart was in agony because he had already heard the sound of the trumpet and foreseen the battle and the disaster that would befall the whole land. All this he saw was because the people were fools and did not know the Lord with whom they were supposedly in a covenant relationship which would have guaranteed their safety.

## Question 2

Read the prayer of Jeremiah in 32: 17-25 and then list the main points in the prophet's prayer.

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## Praying with Understanding

The prayer you have just been studying in Jeremiah 32 is a good example of the way the prophets sometimes had to argue out a difficult problem with the Lord. On this occasion Jeremiah was locked up in prison when his cousin Hanamel came to him urging him to buy a field which was his right of redemption in his home village of Anathoth. The prophet had already received advance warning of this before Hanamel arrived but he simply could not understand why God was telling him to purchase this field. He nevertheless paid the money and signed and sealed the deed with the signatures of witnesses and symbolically he put it into a clay jar so that it would last a long time.

Having been obedient Jeremiah nevertheless still did not fully understand the reasons why God had instructed him to purchase this piece of land which was in enemy occupied territory. It was a time when no one was buying and selling land and Jeremiah wanted to make sure that he understood the reasons why God had told him to do this so that he could fully perceive the spiritual significance underlying his action. The prayer is a classic example of the way the prophets began with praise and adoration as they entered the presence of the Almighty God. Then he moved to praising God and remembering all the wonderful things which God had done in the history of the nation. Finally he brought his petition asking why God had instructed him to buy the field when the Babylonians were already building up their siege ramps around the city and God had already warned him that the city would fall to the attackers.

Jeremiah needed to know that he really was hearing correctly from the Lord so that the word he was declaring to the nation was not just from his own imagination as was the case with the false prophets. They were saying that no harm would come to the people (5: 12). The false prophets practised deceit and misled the people. The charge against them was ‘they dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. Peace, peace they say, when there is no peace’ (6: 13-14). The most serious consequences of false prophecy are spelt out by Jeremiah in chapter 23.

Jeremiah knew that if he did not really understand the situation and the way in which God was working out his purposes in the nation he would not be able rightly to declare the word of the Lord. This is why it was essential that he regularly got before the Lord in prayer to ensure that he was hearing rightly so that he could pray with understanding and tell the people what he was hearing from God.

**Question 3**

Read the first chapter of the book of Habakkuk. What is the main purpose of the prophet’s complaint to God? What was God’s answer?

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**Creative Prayer**

We have already established that the prophets were great patriots. They loved the nation and their chief task was to act as the mouthpiece of God in bringing the word of the Lord to the people. We have also established that the prophets practised getting into the presence of the Lord in order to hear from him so that they could know what he was saying to the nation. Additionally, we have established that the prophets were intercessors for the nation, they regularly prayed for the people, but they did not simply pray for the things the people wanted.

The prophet’s ministry was to pray in accordance with the will of God. This sometimes meant even praying hard prayers as when Elijah prayed for drought to come upon the land. This must have been a prayer he did not want to pray because he knew the terrible suffering it would bring upon the people and upon livestock and vegetation. Elijah knew that a prolonged drought would bring barrenness and devastation to the land - the land that he loved. It was in such circumstances that there was a tension between the personal desires of the prophet and his loyalty to God.

As the servant of the Lord the prophet had to be totally obedient to God. Therefore his prayers had to be in line with the will of God. A major task of the prophets, therefore, was to discern the purposes of God so that they could pray his will into being. This is what we have called ‘creative prayer’. We may define creative prayer as ‘praying the will of God into being’.

Creative prayer was the means by which the prophets were used as the instrument for implementing the purposes of God. Creative prayer brings together revelation and intercession. It ensures that the intercessor is praying in line with the will of God and not against him.

If we simply come to God with our own shopping basket of requests without first seeking his face to know his will we may experience the frustration of unanswered prayer or what is even worse, we may find ourselves praying for things which are against the will of God. The prophets of Israel learned to exercise both discernment and discipline so that when they interceded God was able to use them to fulfil his purposes.

**Question 4**

What are the essential pre-requisites for creative prayer?

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## Praying for Guidance

We have already noted that it was the task of leadership to pray for the people as intercessors for the nation. The prophets took a major share of this responsibility and there are numerous references to the prophets praying to God, as for example when Isaiah joined King Hezekiah in praying for the protection of Jerusalem when it was under threat from the Assyrian invasion led by Sennacherib (2 Chronicles 32 :20).

An account of the same incident is recorded in Isaiah 37 where the King sent some of his senior advisers to the prophet Isaiah asking him to pray for them to which Isaiah responded, ‘tell your master, this is what the Lord says; do not be afraid of what you have heard ...’ (Isaiah 37: 6). Hezekiah then went into the temple and spread before the Lord the threatening letter he had received from the Assyrians. The reference in 2 Chronicles 32 :20 indicates that Isaiah joined him and together they sought the face of the Lord. The guidance they received was that they should do nothing, but wait and see the victory which the Lord would bring against the invading army which was apparently decimated by a plague which killed ‘185,000 men in the Assyrian camp’ (Isaiah 37 :36).

On another occasion, during the reign of King Jehoshaphat when the nation was threatened by a large invading army from several nations the King called the whole nation to a time of fasting and prayer. Jehoshaphat himself led the people in prayer in front of the temple in Jerusalem. His prayer is a model for seeking guidance from the Lord, ‘for we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you’ (2 Chronicles 20: 12).

God answered this request for guidance by using the prophet Jahaziel. It is noteworthy that his full lineage is given in verse 14. This was important as a means of checking the veracity of the guidance given at times when it was essential for national survival that the word should not come from a false prophet and mislead the nation. Jehoshaphat was very aware of this danger and this is why, on another occasion, he refused simply to accept the words of Ahab’s prophets who were all giving encouragement to go into battle against the Syrians saying that the two kings would be victorious (1 Kings 22: 12).

On this occasion when the spirit of the Lord came upon Jahaziel the king was satisfied that the words he was hearing were coming from a genuine prophet of the Lord. The message was ‘Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not your’s, but God’s’ (2 Chronicles 20: 15). This encouraging message was followed by clear directions giving details of the enemy’s intended actions and the response from the army of Judah.

Jehoshaphat's response to this guidance is also a model of faithful obedience. He worshipped the Lord in humility and praised God for his faithfulness, then he exhorted the people to have faith and to be obedient. He then followed carefully the directions which had been given and acted in complete faith going out from Jerusalem singing praises to the Lord as though the victory in battle had already occurred - such was his confidence in the faithfulness of God. He knew that if God gave a promise he would keep his word.

## Question 5

Why did Jeremiah feel compelled to seek an explanation as to why God should tell him to buy the field at Anathoth?

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## The Prophetic Silence

The prophets were great intercessors for the nation as we have already seen. Moses, in his speech to the people in preparation for crossing the Jordan into the promised land, reminded the people of how he had interceded on their behalf, both for individuals and for the whole nation. He said ‘the Lord was angry enough with Aaron to destroy him, but at that time I prayed for Aaron too’ (Deuteronomy 9: 20). In the same speech he reminded them of how he had interceded for the nation after they had incurred the anger of

the Lord through making the golden calf. He said 'I lay prostrate before the Lord those 40 days and 40 nights because the Lord had said he would destroy you. I prayed to the Lord and said O sovereign Lord do not destroy your people ....'  
(Deuteronomy 9: 25-26).

As long as the prophets were praying for the people, even when they were rebellious, there was hope. The fervent prayers of the faithful servants of God many times availed for the people. There are numerous examples throughout scripture of such prayers. Ezra was so aware and ashamed of the sins of the people that when he was praying to God in public in Jerusalem he wept uncontrollably throwing himself down on the ground in front of the temple. This stimulated a response from the people who also wept and confessed their sins. (Ezra 10: 1).

It was when the prophets ceased to pray for the people that the nation became exposed to the full force of judgment. The covering protection of the Lord was removed and the land lay open to attack from the enemy. This was a spiritual principle which was well established in the history of Israel. In fact it goes back to the time of Abraham when he interceded on behalf of the city of Sodom. He pleaded with God to spare the place for the sake of the righteous people within its walls. He was told that if he could find 50 righteous people God would spare the city. When this was eventually reduced to ten Abraham ceased to plead with the Lord. That silence sealed the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah and of the whole surrounding plain, Genesis 18: 16-33.

Jeremiah was the only prophet who was directly instructed to cease praying for the nation. Three times it is recorded that he received this instruction; 'So do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them; do not plead with me, for I will not listen to you.' (7: 16); 'Do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them, because I will not listen when they call to me in the time of their distress.' (11: 14); 'Then the Lord said to me, Do not pray for the well-being of this people. Although they fast, I will not listen to their cry; though they offer burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them' (14: 11-12).

These were surely the most terrifying words that any prophet could receive when he entered the council of the Lord. The implication was that it was already too late. The sinful rebellious spirit which had gripped the entire nation had now sealed its fate. The enemy was already at the gate. They had had so many chances to hear and heed the word of the Lord but they had refused to repent. Now it was too late. The prophetic silence descended upon the land. The covering protection of the Lord was withdrawn.

### Question 6

Why did not Amos continue to plead for the people when he received the third vision recorded in Amos 7: 1-8?

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### Assignment

Using any of the material in this lesson write an essay of between 500 and 1000 words on the theme 'The Prophet at Prayer'.

### Answers for Lesson 7

1. Samuel had warned the people in his farewell speech about the dangers of rebelling against the commands of the Lord (2 Samuel 12: 15) and they had just witnessed a practical demonstration of the power of the Lord through a thunderstorm.
2. Jeremiah began his prayer by praising God for his greatness and for his love. He then recounted the deeds of the Lord and the wonderful things he had done for the nation. Finally he brought the question which was on his mind in the form of a petition, why was God asking him to buy the field when the city was about to fall to the Babylonians?
3. The prophet could not understand why God allowed so much injustice and why he tolerated wicked men. God's answer was that he could even use the most wicked and unjust nation, the Babylonians, to serve his purposes.
4. Getting into the presence of God; listening to him; discerning the significance of what he is saying; understanding his will or how he intends to fulfil his purposes.
5. The land surrounding Jerusalem was already occupied by the Babylonians and Jeremiah was prophesying total defeat for his own people. He had not yet understood that God was wanting him to change the focus of the message to the time of restoration when he would bring the people back to the land and 'houses, fields and vineyards' would again be bought in the land (Jeremiah 32: 15).
6. The plumb-line symbolised the word of the Lord which was bringing judgment upon the nation and which showed how far the nation had strayed from the true paths of righteousness.