

Lesson 8

The Message of the Prophets

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

1. Describe the significance for the prophets of an understanding of the nature of God.
2. Be familiar with the biblical revelation of God's control of all natural phenomena.
3. Understand the witness of the prophets concerning the sovereignty of God.
4. Be familiar with the ethical requirements of God in the teaching of the prophets.
5. Be familiar with the universality in the teaching of the prophets concerning God's dealings with the nations.
6. Understand the nature of the Covenant which God established with Israel.
7. Describe the purposes of God as revealed in the teaching of the prophets.

Introduction

The message of the prophets is a vast subject on which multitudes of books and commentaries have been written. It is the longest chapter in our textbook and due to the amount of reading involved the notes for this lesson will be short.

It is essential to read Chapter 8 ‘The Message of the Prophets’ very carefully. Read the chapter right through before attempting to look at it section by section.

In this lesson we have reached the central theme of the whole of this course. Until now we have been dealing with peripheral matters, defining what we mean by prophecy, studying the way in which the prophets received the word of God, looking at the characteristics of the prophets as servants of God and studying the methods they used for carrying out their ministry. Now we have reached the point where we are ready to study the message itself. We shall be attempting to answer the question, ‘What was the essential core message of the prophets?’ In seeking an answer to this question we shall examine a large number of themes, particularly noting those which are common to several or all of the prophets.

The Nature of God

In order to understand the message of the prophets we have to have a clear understanding of how they thought of God. The prophets concept of the nature of God was fundamental to their ministry. In earlier lessons we have stressed the importance for the prophets of a personal relationship with God. For each of the prophets this was the foundation of their ministry. They knew themselves to have been called by God to be his messengers, to be the mouthpiece of the Lord to the nation.

For each of the prophets the foundation of their ministry lay in their understanding of the nature of God. Without such an understanding they could not have understood his purposes; neither could they have given direction to the people, particularly in times of crisis. To know God, to have a personal relationship with him, meant that the prophet had to be aware of the very nature of God. In the textbook we have stated that the prophet saw God as:

*‘a God of law, a God of love,
a God of mercy, a God of justice,
a God of holiness, and a God of faithfulness’*

(pp 144/145). These themes are detailed in the notes on pages 136 to 134 and need to be studied carefully particularly looking up the scripture references and noting them in their context.

Question 1

Why was it important for the prophets to understand the nature of God?

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Lord of Nature

All the prophets believed God to be in control of nature. He was not seen simply as the God who looked after his people Israel, but as the one who had power over nature. He could send the rain or he could withhold the rain. He gave the seasons of springtime and harvest and thus through his control of the natural forces in the universe he was able to provide for his people.

Question 2

Why is Isaiah's statement 'He has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand' (Isaiah 40: 12) important for an understanding of God as Lord of nature?

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Lord of History

All the prophets believed that God was in control of the destiny of the nations. He not only guided the affairs of his own people in the land of Israel but he had sovereign control over international affairs.

This international sovereignty went beyond anything in the teachings of the religions of other nations. This pure monotheism reached its height in Isaiah where the prophet actually spoke of God raising up an enemy emperor to do his bidding. In Isaiah 45 the prophet dares to call Cyrus (a pagan king), 'the Lord's anointed'. This is the same phrase as is used for the Messiah and is intended to show that God has raised up this king who does not even know him as a special messenger to carry out his purposes of salvation for Israel. Cyrus was the Lord's anointed one to overcome the power of Babylon and to release the people of Israel, God's Covenant people, from slavery and to provide for them to return to Jerusalem.

This was an incredible revelation which was given to the prophet enabling him to build on the message of the eighth century prophets and that of Jeremiah in the sixth century. These prophets had each seen that God could use pagan enemy kings as instruments of judgment against his own people. But Isaiah goes further in seeing that God could also use a pagan emperor to carry out his purposes of salvation.

Question 3

What verse would you use to demonstrate the prophet's belief that God was in control of history?

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God of Ethical Requirements

The ministry of the eighth century prophets represents a major development in the religious history of Israel. With the teaching of Amos and Hosea a new emphasis was introduced. This highlighted the ethical requirements of God over against the mere observance of ritualistic practices.

It is a matter of some debate among scholars as to whether or not the prophets condemned the whole sacrificial system or whether they believed that the spiritual purpose of ritual sacrifice had been lost and they were attempting to bring the people back to a major emphasis upon the ethical requirements of God. The textbook deals at some length with this problem on pages 149/154.

Question 4

'To Amos the whole religious sacrificial system was a sign of syncretism and unfaithfulness to God.' (p 149 of the textbook) why was this?

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God of Universal Morality

The eighth century prophets extended the knowledge and understanding of the nature of God and of his universal sovereignty. They saw him as having control over all the nations of the world. Although he was especially the God of Israel and he had a special relationship with both the land and the people, he nevertheless was the God of all the world. Isaiah saw him as holding the nations in his hands. 'He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing' (Isaiah 40: 23).

This understanding of God as having control over the nations led the prophets to apply their understanding of the nature of God to his sovereign power over nations other than Israel and Judah. God therefore demanded standards of righteousness of the other nations as well as of his Covenant people. This was particularly applied to bloodshed and violence. These sins were abhorrent to God and they feature strongly in Amos' famous declaration of the word of God concerning international affairs (Amos 1: 3 - 2: 3).

The sins of the other nations were all to do with bloodshed and violence and they contrast strongly with the sins of Judah and Israel where the central charge was that of Idolatry. God did not hold this against the other nations since they did not know him. It was not until the post exilic period that God's purpose for Israel as a light to the Gentiles became explicit. Even before the nations knew him they should have known that murder, the shedding of innocent blood and violence were wrong. This had been known to all peoples ever since the time of Cain and Abel. Thus the prophets were able to declare a universal morality which, although basic, applied to all peoples.

Question 5

Using a Concordance look up the word 'judgment' and find any references in the prophets which you think applies to all mankind and not just to Israel.

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God of the Covenant

The Covenant with Israel had its basis as far back as Abraham and the special relationship between him and God. Abraham was known as the friend of God. The Lord gave him promises concerning his descendants that they would be as numerous as the stars in the heavens. Genesis 15: 6 records that 'Abraham believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.' In Genesis 17 God specifically established a Covenant with Abraham which was said to be an everlasting Covenant (v7). The sign of the Covenant was circumcision (v11). And in verses 19 -21 this Covenant was extended to Isaac and to his descendants.

There are numerous other references to the Covenant which was renewed in the time of Moses and then again towards the end of Joshua's lifetime. The Covenant was the basis of the special relationship between God and Israel and it was the basis upon which the prophets based their calls for repentance and for a return to the ways of righteousness and obedience to God.

In generation after generation the disobedience of the people brought varying degrees of disaster upon them and in response God raised up prophets to explain what had gone wrong in terms of the disobedience of the people and neglect of their responsibilities towards God to fulfil their obligations under the terms of the Covenant. A major part of the message of the prophets was to remind the nation of the Covenant relationship which existed between God and Israel and which had been established by their forefathers.

Disobedience to the Covenant brought disastrous consequences for the nation, whereas obedience ensured that the nation was walking in the paths of righteousness and truth and that they would be under the loving care and protection of God because God was always faithful. He never broke his Covenant promises however unfaithful the people proved to be.

Question 6

Express in the simplest form of words the Covenant between God and Israel.

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The Purposes of God

This is a long section in the textbook and requires very little additional notes. In fact the purposes of God could well be summed up by using the headings in this section.

Remnant and Restoration

God’s purpose for Israel was to watch over the faithful remnant and to restore the fortunes of Israel even in times of disaster such as the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile in Babylon.

Light to the Gentiles

God’s purpose in establishing a Covenant relationship with Israel was so that they might be in this special relationship with him which would enable them to be his servants. He had raised up Israel to be a light unto the Gentiles so that they might share their special knowledge of God with all the nations of the world.

Universal knowledge of God

It was God’s intention that there should be universal knowledge of himself. He wanted all the nations to know him so that they could all walk in the paths of righteousness and that all men and women everywhere could come into a saving knowledge of God.

Judgment of the Nations

The judgment of the nations is a theme which occurs throughout the prophets and spills over into the New Testament as an inevitable part of God’s purposes. As the knowledge of God spreads throughout the nations so the obligation to establish standards of righteousness increases. The prophets realised that the sinful nature of man would always be in rebellion against the righteousness of God, even refusing his love and mercy and compassion so that a time of judgment for the nations was seen to be inevitable.

Universal Peace

The prophets foresaw a time of universal peace following the execution of judgment among the nations. They believed that it was God’s ultimate intention to establish peace on earth. They said that he would establish his reign on earth through his Messiah so that not only would the nations cease to make war against one another, but that the whole of nature would be harmonised; that the wolf would live with the lamb and the lion would lie down with the goat.

God’s Final Authority

The prophets foresaw that God’s ultimate purpose was the establishment of his authority among the nations. They believed that in order to do this he would have to intervene in the history of mankind in order to quell the violence and suppress the wickedness of men who would never willingly accept his authority. The prophet’s foresaw that God would eventually overrule in the rebellious nations so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting God’s authority would be supreme in all the world and indeed over the whole created order of the universe which he himself had created and seen to be good.

Question 7

What scripture reference in the message of the prophets would you quote linking the mission of the Messiah with the establishment of God’s reign of peace on earth?

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Assignment

Write an essay of not more than one thousand words on the purposes of God in the message of the prophets.

Answers for Lesson 8

1. Without such an understanding the prophets would have been unable to know the word of God and faithfully to declare it.
2. The local Baals who were the gods of the nations were thought to have control of the rain or the fertility of the land over which they had control. But Isaiah declared that the God of Israel was, in fact, the creator of the whole universe. He was Lord of nature.
3. There are a number of verses that can be used such as 'He lifts up a banner for the distant nations, he whistles for those at the end of the earth. Here they come swiftly and speedily!' (Isaiah 5: 26).
4. In 1 Kings 12: 25-33 there is an account of Jeroboam setting up two golden calves and telling the people of Israel that these were their gods. Amos spoke at Bethel and denounced the whole system which had begun there.
5. Isaiah 66: 16 is a good example, although there are a number of others.
6. I will be your God and you will be my people.
7. Isaiah 9: 6 & 7