

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS

The last seventeen books of the Old Testament were all written by or about Israel's prophets. They are arranged in your Bible together as a unit. The prophets lived at the same time as many of the kings of Israel - those who followed Saul, David, and Solomon. In fact, a number of Prophets are mentioned in the books of 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles. Perhaps no part of the Bible is less known than the prophets. But no part is more powerfully relevant to our lives today.

Through the centuries the books of the prophets have been divided into two groups. The first five, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel, are called the "*Major Prophets*" and the last twelve are called the "*Minor Prophets*". These labels have nothing to do with their importance; they refer to the fact that the major prophets each took a whole scroll to be written, whereas the minor prophets could all fit on one scroll.

The word "*prophet*" along with the noun 'prophecy' and the verb "to prophesy" are probably familiar to you. Perhaps they convey to you the idea of predicting events in the future, particularly the great events of the coming Messiah, or Savior. The prophets were known in their own day, however, both for declaring the Word of the Lord for their times, as well as telling the distant future - all centering around God's keeping his covenant promises of a Savior, *foretelling* the future act of God in Jesus Christ, and *forth-telling* the present acts of God in history; these were the dual roles of the prophets.

Prophets in Israel are usually seen in two ways. First, we can divide them into the *writing* prophets and the *non-writing* prophets. Not all the prophets had their prophecies written down. We've already learned about *Nathan*, the prophet who stood up to mighty King David and told him the truth about his sordid affair with Bathsheba. Then there were prophets like *Elijah and Elisha* who were the conscience of the nation when the kings were corrupt. In most cases, even the writing prophets first spoke their prophecies - to kings, to crowds of people, to small groups of disciples, - words which were later written down, preserved, and treasured through the centuries down to our own time.

Unfortunately, not all the prophets who spoke to God's people were true prophets. There were false prophets, too, (and there always have been) who claimed to bring the Word of the Lord. How do you tell the true messenger of God from the imposter? That was one of the great problems for the people of God, as it is still today. An important difference between the true and the false prophets was, of course, that what the true prophets predicted actually happened, while the predictions of the false prophets did not. Of course, that didn't always solve the problem when the prophets predicted events centuries away, since it was impossible to wait and see who was right. In general, though, we can say that the false prophets uttered what the people wanted to hear, good things about themselves, promises of victories in battle, words of comfort and peace. The true prophets, on the other hand, uttered warnings of coming destruction, painful words about the sinfulness of the people and the need to repent. Another difference was that the true prophets spoke their words out of deep love and concern for their own people, while the false prophets exploited the people for their own gain. People looking for the easy way out were usually fair game for the false prophets. The book of *Jeremiah* shows examples of the clash between the true and the false prophets.

Let's look at the events which were taking place amongst God's chosen people, and the role the prophets played during these events.

David the king represented the pinnacle of hopes in the Israelite nation for worldly power, honour and glory. Between the year 1000 B.C. when David began to reign, and 587 B.C. when his magnificent capital, Jerusalem, fell to the Babylonian invaders, lie four centuries of uneven, downward spiral into moral, religious and political decay. Afterward came seventy years of captivity and over a century of struggle to restore the nation to peace, security, and the right worship of God. This was the era of the prophets.

We have already seen that even David's reign was not immune to moral failures and civil strife. His son Solomon raised the nation to its golden age of wealth. That wealth was used to build a magnificent temple to the Lord, yet that same wealth also led to concessions to the pagan religions, principally to please the

thousand wives Solomon had taken as part of his treaties with other nations.

By the time Solomon's son, Rehoboam, came to the throne with even bolder schemes for power, ten of the twelve tribes revolted. These ten northern tribes kept the name Israel and built a new capital at Samaria. Only two tribes, known as the kingdom of Judah, remained loyal to Jerusalem. The northern kingdom of Israel lasted 200 years, but in 722 B.C. the people were carried into captivity by Assyria, never to return to Samaria as a powerful people again.

The kingdom of Judah held out 165 years longer, mainly by compromising with whatever nation was in power at the time. Around 600 B.C. the famed king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon gained power over Palestine. He surrounded Jerusalem, and took the royal family captive, along with 10,000 of Judah's leading nobles, soldiers, and craftsmen. One of these was the prophet *Daniel*. Only the poor, the unskilled, the uneducated, the defenseless were left in the land. When the leftover Judeans rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, he brought his armies to Jerusalem, laid siege, then destroyed the city, leveling even the majestic temple which Solomon had built.

The true prophets of God foretold the destruction of the nation. Sadly, they cried out their prophecies of doom. Angrily, the people attacked the prophets, imprisoning and even killing them. Tradition says *Isaiah* was "sawn asunder." Others were expelled from the country.

But the prophets had more than a negative message. They also held out hope of the dawning of a new day. It would not be a day of military victory, but it would be a day of the Lord, a day of His power and love ruling once again— this time in a new, personal way.

The bible says that *holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit*. The prophets were led by God to proclaim the words that God wanted His people to hear. They brought the people a powerful message of sin and grace. Because of the sinfulness of God's chosen people, they would experience the pain and punishment that sin brings. But the hope, the promise of God's grace and forgiveness was also very important. It reminded the people—and us—that God is a forgiving God, who will bring blessings to those who trust in Him.

During the Babylonian captivity these inspired writings — along with the *Torah*, the books of Moses (Genesis to Deuteronomy), the *Writings* (Job to Song of Solomon) and the *Historical Books* (Joshua - Esther) were collected by scribes into the basic form that we know today as the books of the Old Testament. And as the people of Israel learned through the Exile, God can work great miracles for His people. This history of God's people speaks to us even today about the life we can have with God through faith in His promised Messiah, Jesus Christ.