

THE MAJOR PROPHETS

The Bible tells of God's desire to create paradise on earth, of man's decision instead to thumb his nose at God, ushering into our world that 3-letter word which we *love* to do -- but resent being accused of S-I-N.

God, as we read on, loves us too much to let us suffer the eternal consequences of sin (which are separation from Him in a place the Bible calls hell). To erase this not-so-hot outcome, God sends His Son Jesus to pay with His own life the awful price to have our sins forgiven forever.

BIBLE PROPHECY

Now we come to a string of 17 prophetic books; the first five of which are called the "Major Prophets." Not because of their importance, but their length. The last 12 are, yup, the Minor Prophets.

Prophecy reveals to mere mortals what God wants us to know about Himself and His plans for us.

The prophets reveal the heart and passion of God. Like a kind parent, God was seeking a meaningful relationship with His kids, the Jewish people. When they repeatedly spurn His advances, the prophets draw graphic word pictures of God's wounded heart. Yet God is full of compassion, still wanting to reconcile with His wayward sons and daughters.

Prophets were God's evangelists during a very dark 500 years of Jewish history 1,000 B.C. - 500 B.C. The Jewish kingdom was divided by civil war into two monarchies: Israel (the northern kingdom) and Judah (the southern kingdom whose capital was Jerusalem).

During this bleak period the Jews were overrun and dragged into exile. King of the mountain for 300 years, Assyria was competing with Egypt and Babylon for world dominance. Assyrian hordes roared into Judah 734 B.C. to 701 B.C., destroying 46 walled cities and carting off 200,000 captives (including 10,000 "chief men" and royalty). Babylon crushed Assyria in 607 B.C. and hustled into exile the Jews of Judah. Egypt fell to Babylon at Carchemish, 500 miles northeast of Jerusalem in 605 B.C. At the crossroads of the world, today Palestine still is the bloody battleground of the ages.

God sent Judah a heads-up about their being taken captive by Babylon more than a century before it happened (Isaiah 39:6; Micah 4:10). Babylon is Bible-speak for "evil," especially in Revelation 18. It's associated with excess, indulgence, abuse, violence and demonic activity. The length of the Jews' 70-year captivity here was foretold by Jeremiah (25:11-12). Yet their enslavement by foreign aggressors did not drive the people of Judah back to God. Instead they plunged deeper into worshipping idols.

Israeli prophets had the daunting duty of confronting kings and subjects with their sins and the punishment that must follow if they didn't turn from their wicked ways and worship the one true God. His fearless mouthpieces, with an unwelcome message, also foretold future events such as:

- The global scattering and captivity of God's chosen people
- The first coming of the Messiah

- The return of the Jews to live in their own Promised Land, the nation of Israel
- The coming reign of the Messiah over the entire earth from His throne in Jerusalem (chapters 60-66)

Q: Were there “false” prophets then; are there any now? A: yes and yes. How can you tell the difference? Let’s read Deuteronomy 18:14-22.

Prophecy is so vital to God that fully one-third of the Bible is devoted to it. Prophets always addressed:

- the sins of their own generation (primarily the worship of anything *except* the one true God). The first of The Ten Commandments is “You will have no other gods before me.”
- future events including the coming of the Messiah and the kingdom which He will ultimately establish on earth
- basic principles of right and wrong which apply to every era. (The Bible teaches that a person’s attitude toward God will affect his/her entire moral life which determines his/her conduct. This gives the lie to “It makes no difference what you believe.”)

ISAIAH

Isaiah was martyred at age 120, sawed in half by idolatrous King Manasseh, per Jewish tradition. He may have been the greatest of Israel’s prophetic voices 740 B.C.-681 B.C. His career spanned the reign of four of Judah’s kings, during the time of Romulus and Remus and the founding of Rome in 753 B.C. Sparta and Athens were founded about this time.

His heart ached for Judah, the southern kingdom, who flipped off God. He knew that would result in their personal and national calamity. Then as now, God gives people an opportunity to accept His love.

Isaiah is quoted in the New Testament more than any other prophet. His brilliant writing, say some scholars, is unequalled by Shakespeare, Milton or Homer. He addressed these major themes:

- Being outwardly religious doesn’t impress God.
- While He dearly loves *all* people -- since He *created* them all -- He is a just God who despises sin and deals with it accordingly.
- Although many spurn His love, always a few remain loyal to God.

Isaiah describes the overthrow of Israel by foreigners from Assyria and Babylon -- and foretells the coming of Messiah to earth (ch. 40 ff) who takes on Himself the load of our sin and is crucified so that God’s justice might be satisfied (ch. 53), extending forgiveness to all who accept it by simply believing that in faith.

Isaiah foresaw the Jews' return from exile in Babylon. He also spoke of Messiah's second trip to earth – which is yet to come -- when He'll return in power and great glory (chs. 60-66) to defeat the great imposter known as Anti-Christ (detailed in Revelation, the last book of the Bible).

Now let's read:

- Isaiah 40
- Isaiah 53 (one of the best-loved chapters in the Bible, written 700 years before Christ was crucified, yet it cannot possibly fit any person in history but the Son of God)
- Isaiah 34 (his vision of the “end time”)

JEREMIAH

Jeremiah was a pathetic, lonely figure who began his career sixty years after Isaiah who had saved Jerusalem from the Assyrians. The last prophet of God to warn Judah of their coming capture, Jeremiah tried to keep Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians from taking this city. It was burned in 586 B.C. Neb, to his buds, could've dissed it twenty years earlier but wanted to drain it of tribute money (can you say “*taxes?*”).

The marauders from modern-day Iraq left a few of the poorest of the poor behind. Jeremiah, “the weeping prophet,” remained with them, then followed this hapless remnant down into Egypt where Tertullian says the Jews stoned him to death. Jewish historians say he escaped to Babylon and died there.

This timid man was given a tough mission during the most trying hour of God's chosen people. When called by God to be a prophet at age 21, Jeremiah resisted, pointing to his youth, inexperience and lack of eloquence. Funny how God often chooses unlikely folks to do His work.

Jeremiah's yucky job was to tell the Jews 626 B.C.-585 B.C. (35 years before the birth of Confucius) that if they refused to turn from their evil ways, their cushy lifestyle would be snuffed out by an invader. The thanks Jerry got was the hatred of all, even his family, plus beatings and imprisonment. Yet he obeyed God who seems to give to each of us a Jeremiah who encourages us to walk with God.

Jeremiah wrote this book on parchment scrolls about 580 B.C., twenty years before Aesop wrote his fables. He speaks of the coming Christ in chapters 23, 31 and 33.

Let's read chapter 30 which describes a time yet to come.

LAMENTATIONS

“Jeremiah's Grotto” is just outside Jerusalem's north wall where tradition says he composed this sorrowful elegy of five, poignant funeral songs about Jerusalem's soon annihilation. It's under the knoll called Golgotha, the very hill on which the cross of Jesus stood. This hallowed spot is the repository of both Jeremiah's and Jesus' tears.

It contains not only the wailing of the prophet but his view of God's blazing sun above the gathering clouds. Amidst indescribable pain and hopelessness, God's compassionate grace breaks through sin's fog, shining in the hearts of all who place their faith in God by believing in His Son, Jesus Christ. Sufferers find comfort in Isaiah (61:3) who says God's Spirit will give "beauty for ashes; joy instead of mourning; praise instead of heaviness."

Let's read chapter 5.

EZEKIEL

In 625 B.C. Greece changed its currency from grain to metal because it was easier to carry and didn't mold. In 597 B.C. Ezekiel was taken to Babylon as a captive, commencing his historic stint as God's prophetic voice to the Jews exiled there.

Babylon was the world's most beautiful city, getting heavy airtime on CNN (the Cairo News Network)! It was filled with palaces, gardens, temples and bridges. In 580 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar II built the famous "hanging gardens," one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Fifty miles from this splendor, some quarter million Jews were mere chattel. As a slave speaking to slaves, Ezekiel reminded his kinsman of why all these calamities had befallen them, underscoring that God will fulfill His promises including restoring their land, city and temple.

Stressed and oppressed to the max, Zeke refused to trash his faith, opting to move ahead, trusting God to ultimately honor his obedience to Him. Which He did.

Ezekiel's main raps were:

- God would rather forgive us than judge us.
- God remains faithful to us even when we aren't faithful to Him.
- God has control over all the events in this world; He can and does use evil circumstances to accomplish greater good.
- God helps those who are loyal to Him to get through any difficult time.

God seems to speak most persuasively through those whose hearts have been broken. Aren't you most passionate about what's touched you most deeply? Why did Jesus have to die like a common thief? It was His own broken body, bruised and slaughtered to pay for your sins and mine, that calls to us over these 2,000 years.

The old spiritual, "Ezekiel saw the wheel" was inspired by chapter 37, Ezekiel's vision of the "dry bones" is a prediction of the national resurrection of scattered Israel, their return to their own land, the re-union of Judah and Israel under the reign of an everlasting king called "David." It forecasts the conversion of the Jews to Christ, as the apostle Paul predicted (Romans 11:15, 25, 26).

Let's read the key passage of this book: 11:16 - 12:2.

Let's also read 24:1-2. God wants to give even His disobedient children evidence that He's trying to get through to them. By having Ezekiel record this specific date, Zeke would prove

God was speaking supernaturally through him. Back then when news took months to span long distances, Ezekiel's written record of the exact date of the siege of Jerusalem -- 'though he was 500 miles away in Babylon at the time -- would confirm his prophetic office.

And let's read 26:1-14. This prophecy came true later when Greece's Alexander the Great tore down the walls around Tyre and threw them into the sea. As God predicted through Ezekiel, the city's never been rebuilt.

DANIEL

At 16 Daniel was hauled off to Babylon in 606 B.C. where he lived to be 90 during Judah's entire 70-year captivity there. He held high positions under kings Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Darius and Cyrus in both Babylonian and Persian empires.

This companion of kings served 69 years in one wicked administration after another. Yet he lived a blameless, respected life, remaining true to God in the most pagan environment. (Ezekiel 14:14-20, 28:3) Although he was a captive, he became prime minister of Babylon, history's first empire. No salacious, compromising situation ever found him *not* trusting in God.

Babylon, built around the Tower of Babel, sat near the cradle of the human race, the Garden of Eden. It was a favorite residence of Babylonian, Assyrian and Persian kings, including Alexander the Great. It reached its zenith under Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel's friend and adviser.

This impregnable city's walls were 15 miles long on each of four sides, 300 feet high, 80 feet thick and extended 35 feet below ground with 250 towers and 100 gates of brass. The city was divided by the Euphrates river. Its "religious" citizens worshipped at 53 temples with 180 altars to Ishtar.

Daniel's task was to encourage the Jewish captives that God controls all the events of this world, that faith in Him was their only hope.

This towering figure on civilization's stage draws back the curtains that veiled the unknown future as no one had ever done before. His uncanny prophecies are merely history written before it occurred, revealing the sovereignty of God vis a vis the power of nations.

Let's read Daniel 1:1-2:3 and 2:20-23.

And let's read all of Daniel 3 where three young men face a do-or-die situation. Just a small cop-out would've spared them a lot of grief. Yet they chose to stand firm in their faith in God, resolved that His plan for their lives could be trusted, despite the ominous dilemma they were in.

Even when everything goes wrong, God is still good and can still be trusted.

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