

SPECIAL STUDY TWELVE
SHOW ME HOW TO PREACH MORE
EFFECTIVELY FROM THE PROPHETS

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by Paul T. Butler
Professor, Ozark Bible College

I want to commend your President, brother Spratt, and those who assisted him in placing this long neglected, but most important subject matter on the rally program. I have tried for some time now to convince the planners of the OBC Preaching Convention that a whole convention on expository sermons and exegetical lessons from the prophets would be edifying as well as attractive.

To say that there is a revived interest in prophecy would, in some evangelical circles, be the understatement of the year. Coupled with the cataclysmic wars of the past decade or two, the economic revolutions, the ideological mutinies and the very evident headlong plunge downward of morals, we now have impetus for renewed interest in prophecy supplied by a prosperous and victorious nation of Israel rumored to be in the process of gathering materials for the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. One must agree with John P. Milton in his book "Prophecy Interpreted," when he states in his introduction, "This *is* an age of fear. There have been times of fear before, great fear, and widespread; but the words of Jesus in Luke 21:26, 'men fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world,' seems to me uniquely relevant to the situation in the world today."

Since this is an age of fear it is not strange that there should be an increased interest in prophecy. We might call it an interest in eschatology, or "last things." The motivating force at the center of this new prophetic thirst is the same thing that "killed the cat," curiosity. The natural curiosity to know what lies ahead. In times of anxiety or distress it often becomes a cry of fear, "What will the end of these things be?" It expresses the hope for some assurance—some sure word of God, to calm fear. It has always been that way in times of great distress and danger. It is so today.

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Fear, anxiety or curiosity are, I suppose, legitimate motives for leading a person to study the prophets. It certainly is not a motive, especially for Christian people, worthy of what the prophets really have to offer. It will be the shame and eternal regret of the Christian church that its preachers and teachers have neglected to give the proper time and effort to a thorough, correct, and an experiential study of the prophets. All too often the emphasis in the study of prophecy is such as to increase rather than to allay fear. There are preachers and students of prophecy who seem to delight in playing on the fears and anxieties of people. They magnify the threat to peace and say little of "the things that make for peace." They are much concerned to identify men and nations and events today in terms of some specific Biblical prophecy. They focus attention on "antichrists" rather than on Christ; and they seem more concerned to prove what prophecy says about Russia, or about Israel, than to proclaim what it says about the kingdom of God. Dr. Jack P. Lewis, professor of Bible at Harding College Graduate School says in his little book, "The Minor Prophets," "There are still those who think that by diligent search they may find in advance in the prophets what they will read in the papers tomorrow. They search for automobiles, atomic bombs, airplanes, tire rationing, and the rise of world dictators . . . they read these things into the prophets instead of out of them . . . this approach is a frame of mind that tends to blind the student to the true and lasting values in the prophets. It leaves the prophet's message a puzzle to the prophet's hearers rather than being a revelation to them."

This emphasis more often than not leads to an almost "end of the world hysteria." Men delude themselves into presuming to predict "times and seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority (Acts 1:7)." Men "go to seed" on this wrong emphasis and so immerse their minds in elaborate systems and exaggerated interpretations that they soon let this mania sidetrack them from their real calling to preach the good news. It has been reported to me that one preacher in a Christian service camp in teaching premillennialism from the O.T. Prophets so disquieted a group of young people that they went home nearly hysterical. The prophets never intended such consequences from their messages and neither has God. God said to Isaiah, "Comfort my people, says your God." (Isa. 40:1).

Now I have not the time, nor is this the place to debate the various millennial views. Someone has in all seriousness said, "I am neither pre' nor post'. I'm pro." Personally, I prefer Wm. Hendriksen's view of amillennialism. Although it is not my purpose to enter into a lengthy discussion of millennialism, I cannot, by the very nature of the subject

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assigned to me, completely disregard the subject. Whatever I have to say about it will be only secondary, however, to offering what, in my opinion, is a more effective way to preach from the prophets. I should like to pursue the subject, from these three aspects: Interpretation, Analyzation, Application.

INTERPRETATION

Governor George Romney is not the only person who has ever been "brain-washed." Quite a number of preachers have had their prophetic-reflexes so conditioned by radio preachers and correspondence courses on prophecy that they have thrown sound judgment and axiomatic hermeneutical principles to the wind. It is an almost foregone conclusion that when a preacher announces he is going to preach a series of sermons on prophecy the congregation is about to hear such subjects as the Jews today, Russia, the Roman Catholic church, Red China, Anglo-Israelism and other like subjects discussed. This is because we have too long allowed ourselves the dangerous luxury of complacency in proper exegesis and exposition of the Old Testament Prophets. It is always easier to preach from the prophets from a presupposed exegetical basis than it is to spend long hours of study to get the true, hermeneutically-sound, apostolically-sanctioned interpretation. There are quite a few principles of interpretation which are peculiar to prophetic literature only, as well as other general principles of interpretation. The most helpful books I have found on this particular aspect are: *Prophecy Interpreted* by John P. Milton; *The Grammar of Prophecy* by R. B. Girdlestone; *God's Prophetic Word*, by Foy Wallace; *Preaching From the Prophets* by Kyle M. Yates; *Prophecy and The Church* by Oswald T. Allis; commentaries by Edward J. Young, Keil and Delitzsch; and Peter Lange. I have borrowed Mr. Milton's terminology for the titles to some of the principles of interpretation I shall discuss:

a. **TIMES-COLORING, OR, HISTORICAL CONTEMPORANEITY:** The first significance of prophecy is as a message for the prophet's own day. The function of the prophet was first of all that of a preacher and teacher of the will of God for his contemporaries. The prophets were men upon whom God called in a critical point in His plan of redemption. Their urgent task was to stem the downward rebellious plunge of the people with whom God had covenanted to bless the world. The prophets were sent to call out from this decadent, idolatrous nation a faithful remnant; a holy people through which God might deliver the Messiah. Now in order to do this God was going to use a chastening process—captivity. But, lest the people despair, while in the servitude of captivity

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for two generations, the prophets were commissioned to preach (along with their condemnations of sin and warnings of judgment), a message of hope in the future fulfillment of God's covenant in the birth of the Messiah and the establishment of the Messianic Kingdom. So, you see, even the messianic prophecies were given primarily for the people to whom the prophets spoke. Now it should be apparent with only a moment's reflection that the prophets could not have communicated to people of their day in a New Testament dialogue or terminology. The book of Hebrews is very implicit in pointing out that the fathers, to whom the prophets spoke in divers portions and divers manners, were instructed on kindergarten level spiritually speaking. The law was but a shadow of the good things to come. The tabernacle, was a "*parabole*" of the better things. In other words, when the prophets wanted to build hope in the hearts of the Jews—when they wanted to exhort them to have faith in God's ultimate fulfillment of what He had promised to Abraham, they had to "times-color" it, they had to couch it in terms the people of their day would understand. The prophets were not commissioned to paint a chaotic, kaleidoscopic, disjointed eschatological picture puzzle to be assembled later without regard to historical contemporaneity. This you must understand! With this principle you must begin if you are going to preach effectively from the prophets because upon this and the principles to follow depends, in my opinion, the God-intended application or relevancy of the prophetic message for our day! Yes, even the predictive element of the writings of the prophets must be interpreted from within this framework of its contemporaneity. The prophets were poets, in a sense. They painted word pictures. And theirs was contemporary art! The colors (words) they had to use were dictated by the times in which they lived. So the words of the prophets cannot always be interpreted literally. For example, when Obadiah says that Jacob will possess Mount Esau, he is really telling the people that God is someday going to fulfill His covenant promise and bless all people through His covenant people. Amos prophesies the same thing—that when the tabernacle of David is rebuilt the covenant people will not only possess Edom but all nations and we have a divinely inspired interpretation of that by James in Acts 15. James said it was being fulfilled by the response and reception of the Gentiles into the kingdom of God. Baalam made a similar prophecy in Numbers 24:1-17. This also has its ultimate fulfillment in the Messiah and messianic kingdom. Another example; when Isaiah and other prophets speak glowingly of the future glories of Zion, although they talk in terms which some people feel must be fulfilled literally, we know from Hebrews 12:18-29 that Christians have come to Mt. Zion. The church is the object of all the glorious

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things said of Zion by the prophets! Well, I might go on for hours with examples of this principle but these two have brought me to the next principle.

b. COVENANT BACKGROUND: The covenant is, if not THE major theological idea in the Bible, one of the most important ideas. Jesus Christ, is, of course, the central figure and every doctrine, institution, or historical event focuses on Him (which, by the way is a later principle we shall deal with). He is Malachi's "messenger of the Covenant," so the whole Bible, from Gen. 3:15 to Rev. 22 is one majestic, sublime treatise on the fulfillment of God's covenant of redemption. God, in certain sovereign acts, chose to carry out His redemptive activity in history and so the prophets (as well as other books of the Bible) record their history on a background of covenant fulfillment. When we realize that God acted in history to fulfill His covenant we realize also that history as the prophets interpreted it would be purposive—it would have a goal—fulfillment of this covenant. A right understanding of the covenant will help us in rightly interpreting prophecy, for every prophecy must be seen within the setting of the covenant promise and hope. Every prophecy should be studied against the background of the covenant of blessing with Abraham, which through Moses became the national covenant with God's people Israel and through Jesus Christ found fulfillment in a universal covenant. A thorough study of Galatians and Hebrews is imperative if one is to understand the prophetic message of God's future fulfillment of His covenant. It becomes evident (if one will study the prophets without a presupposed theology) that these men spoke of the covenant of God in more than mere temporal ideals. They were well aware that the fulfillment of that covenant concerned more than a physical land and physical nation. They just did not know *who* the "messenger of the Covenant" would be or *when* it would be." (I Pet. 1:10-12). It ought to be apparent even after a cursory study of their writings that they were concerned with spiritual things. They were borne along by the Holy Spirit to interpret all the history of Israel, past, present and future, in the light of this covenant and its ultimate fulfillment.

c. ESCHATOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE: Because the covenant of God presupposes a divine activity in history which looks forward to a future fulfillment or a goal, there is a forward-looking perspective or eschatological aspect to all Old Testament prophecy. Predictive prophecy (even that long span of 600 years of world empires predicted by Daniel) has relevance primarily only as it relates to the divine purpose of fulfilling

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the covenant, Daniel was not writing this history 600 years before it happened just to titillate the curious. He wrote it to strengthen the people of God then and today in the faithfulness of God to keep His word as He kept His covenant. Milton puts it this way: "The prophets were not predictive sharpshooters who sought merely to satisfy human curiosity with respect to the future. They were preachers who sought to renew faith in the ultimate fulfillment of the promises stated . . . in the making of the covenant with Abraham and with Israel. This being true, that predictive prophecy is rooted in covenant theology, it is also true that prophecy is wider in scope than mere specific predictions. In other words, there is a difference between the Messianic hope and specific Messianic predictions. All of prophecy looks forward to the messianic hope—even that which was intended to come to pass in the captivities or restoration. Again, there is a difference between the enunciation of a divine principle of judgment, which may find repeated expression in history, and in the prediction of a specific judgment in time; yet both are forward-looking and both belong to a proper understanding of the prophetic message. The very faith in a God of covenant fulfillment who is actively engaged in judgment and redemption, who can always be counted on to act "in character" reacting in similar situations in the same divine way, is predictive throughout. The theology of the prophets is pregnant with what may be called "the future hope." Specific prediction may be classified in a two-fold way. There may be predictions of events which are quite near, even imminent (judgments, usually). On the other hand, there may be predictions of events which are still in the remote, even indefinite, future (redemption, usually). Biblical eschatology cannot be divorced from the covenant nor the Biblical covenant from eschatology. The one illumines the other. It is equally true that we cannot divorce predictive prophecy from historical contemporaneity. No Old Testament prophecy completely rids itself of the local "times-coloring." But the "times-coloring" does not belong to the essence of a prophecy—it is rather the historical form in which the abiding truth of the prophecy is temporarily clothed."

d. **THE SHORTENED PERSPECTIVE:** The prophets, because the Holy Spirit chose to reveal it that way, sometimes depict the fulfillment of the covenant soon. In some places it seems to be expected right after, and in direct relation to, the historical situation of the moment to which the message of the prophet is directed. Joel 2:27 and 2:28 is a good example of this shortened perspective. Joel interpreted the locust plague and the drought as the Day of Jehovah to bring the covenant people to repentance. Their repentance would sanctify them unto God's purpose

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and then God promised to redeem their land from the ravages of the plague—restore their crops, etc. Then suddenly, wham, he compresses or narrows down or shortens his perspective to focus on the Day of Pentecost, oblivious of all the history that transpires between. This he does from one verse to the next one. There is this "*sequence of purpose*" in the prophetic literature which may easily be confused with a calendar of times and seasons. The prophets were men of faith in the living God, who is the faithful God of covenant promise; because they believed that God is faithful they hoped for a glorious experiential fulfillment of the covenant, and they declared this hope as if it were on the horizon just beyond the present judgment.

e. THE DOUBLE EMPHASIS IN PROPHECY: Our interpretation of prophecy must be guided by a clear recognition of the two chief points of emphasis in Old Testament prophecy; Judgment and Redemption. God's goal is to fulfill His covenant made with Abraham to bless all nations through the seed of Abraham. Ever since the creation and the fall of man it has been God's active desire to bless all men in "Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." Gen. 12:3 and Eph. 1:3-14 are like the two ends of a golden string. A composite picture of the fulfillment of this covenant from the prophetic artists would look like this: a spiritually responsive people at last; the law of God finally written upon their hearts; a realization at last of the perfect fellowship between God and men envisioned by the covenant words "their God" and "my people;" a universal knowledge of God in the deep inner and experiential sense which the prophets always had in mind when they spoke of "knowing the Lord;" a complete and permanent experience of the forgiveness of sin which in itself stood as the wall of partition in the way of true covenant fellowship with God; peace, safety, fruitfulness one flock with one shepherd. In one form or another this is the closing note of almost every prophetic book. Get the picture now as the prophets paint it: the victory of God and His kingdom over every foe; unbroken fellowship between a people sanctified and holy to the Lord and their ever present faithful God a new administration of God's covenant which does not supplant but fulfills, completes, perfects, reaches the goal God had set for the Old. SUCH IS THE GOAL OF HISTORY AS THE PROPHETS SEE IT. Now, how does God, acting in history, move towards fulfillment of this goal—preparing a people? HE DOES SO THROUGH SUCCESSIVE ACTS OF JUDGMENT AND REDEMPTION/ Judgments upon the Gentiles, upon the recalcitrant covenant people all are relevant only in view of God's over-all purpose to sanctify a people. Isa. 10:5-19 illustrates this principle. The Assyrian king had it in his

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heart to dethrone the God of Israel and Judah, but God allowed him to make war on them and used Assyria's rebellion to chasten Israel. At the same time God warned Assyria that when He was finished using them He would punish them also. Parallel to and projecting beyond the motif of judgment is that of redemption. God moves forward towards the goal of His covenant with men by redemptive acts, act of goodness and deliverance ("Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" Rom. 2.4). The primary purpose of the prophetic preaching of judgment and redemption was repentance; but often there was no repentance. God is not mocked. When men do not repent at the preaching of the prophets, He acts. The very events of history are made to speak His will—events such as war, famine, plague, drought, pestilence, epidemic, captivity, catastrophic forces of nature. The divine purpose of the judgment is chastisement rather than destruction, and the divine goal is still a penitent people that will truly seek the Lord. It is only in persistent impenitence that the judgments of God become destruction upon the rebellious—and even then the destruction becomes a testimony of the victory of God over all who oppose His holy will and His kingly power. The prophetic phrase, "the day of the Lord," in a special way embodies this judgment motif. In this phrase the chastening judgment of God is seen as contemporary, near, repeated, having a covenant-related purpose, in the far distant future of Messianic times, all toward the purpose of final and complete redemption. While "the day of the Lord" usually relates to judgment it also relates to historical acts of redemption. Malachi 2:17—3:5 speaks of the "messenger of the covenant" who will come suddenly to His temple and judge and purify the sons of Levi. Before this messenger comes another is to appear who is to prepare the way before Him. This can be none other than John the Baptist and Christ. So, you see, even the first coming of Our Lord is spoken of as a judgment. Jesus Himself said, "For judgment am I come into the world . . ." Jn. 9:39. And yet His first advent is always thought of in terms of the great redemptive action of God—which indeed it truly is—but it is also The Day of Jehovah.

f. THE UNIFYING FOCAL POINT: This preceding point brings us naturally to this one. All prophecy has one central focus—God's redemptive purpose and activity in history which is focused on Jesus Christ, "For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Rev. 19:10). The Incarnation is the dividing line between the Old and the New. In terms of Biblical interpretation it is the dividing line between prophecy and fulfillment. If Christ and the Church be indeed the *real goal* then

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His person, His life, His mission, His teaching, is like the funnel in the hour-glass; in order to be valid and relevant in the new age every prophecy must funnel through the illuminating and transforming reality of the Incarnation and of Pentecost. We shall demonstrate the validity of this as an hermeneutical principle in our next point of discussion. This means that prophecy is significant only in relation to God's plan of salvation through Jesus Christ. Israel as a political entity is not the significant thing in prophecy: the focus is on Israel as a religious community, which God has chosen to call "my people." As such Israel is representative of the people of God in the new age (spiritual Israel, Rom. 2; Gal. 3-4-5). Even that which was intended to be fulfilled literally and contemporary with the time the prophets wrote it, ultimately focuses on the final work of redemption done in Christ. Even that which Daniel prophesied concerning a succession of four world empires over a span of 600 years finds its focus point on the kingdom of God (Dan. 2:44). Just as all the ritual, doctrines, and institutions of the Mosaic law were "shadows of the good things to come," so prophecy all finds its relevance only as it focuses on Christ and the Church.

g. NEW TESTAMENT INTERPRETATION: In interpreting the prophets there are many principles to follow and many characteristics to consider, but it cannot be stressed too much that the surest and plainest guidelines for interpreting them are to be found in the inspired interpretations of Christ and the apostles. They not only tell us when these prophecies were fulfilled but how and in Whom. There are at least 35 large, New Testament contexts which one may use as specific guidelines in forming principles of interpreting O.T. prophecy. I want to deal with only four to illustrate. The first one is in Luke 1:68-75. What do we find here? We find Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, prophesying the glorious nature of the circumstances that are to follow as a result of the birth of his son John. Zechariah is announcing that the time of God's redemption has come, "as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old." He even uses the phraseology of the prophets saying that God's redemption is to be a time when His covenant people would be "saved from their enemies." This was to be the time when God would fulfill the covenant He made with Abraham. So you see, even when the O.T. prophets spoke of the glorious future of God's people as being a time when they would be safe and secure and victorious over their enemies—it was to find its fulfillment in Jesus Christ (cf. Col. 2:14-15 and Rom. 8:31-39). I haven't time to amplify this so I will go on to the next illustration. Luke 4:16-21—Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth, having

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read from the scroll of Isaiah (ch. 61:1-2), said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." It is impossible to miss the fact that even Jesus interpreted Isaiah 61:1-2 as a figurative description of the work of the Messiah, Jesus did not go around opening literal prison houses setting at liberty those who were oppressed. This certainly shows us that much of what the prophets spoke concerning the future glory of Zion and its inhabitants cannot be assumed to have a literal fulfillment except as it focuses on the Incarnation of Christ, His redemptive work in history, and the church of Christ. Next consider Acts 3:17-26. Here Peter says that "what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ should suffer, he thus fulfilled . . . whom heaven must receive until the time for establishing all that God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old . . . And all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came afterwards, also proclaimed these days . . ." **THE PROPHETS WERE NOT CONCERNED WITH ANYTHING EXCEPT THE WORK OF REDEMPTION ACCOMPLISHED BY THE INCARNATE WORK OF CHRIST AND THE ESTABLISHING OF THE CHURCH, THE PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL TO THE WHOLE WORLD.** Heaven must receive Christ until that be accomplished. Then He is coming again, not to establish a Jewish economy, reinstitute the sacrifices, rebuild the temple, and offer the disobedient Jews another opportunity to repent. When He comes the **SECOND** time He is not coming to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him. (Heb. 9:28). The fourth N.T. scripture is found in Hebrews 12:18-29. Here the apostle Paul says to Christians, "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem . . ." Had they come to the Jewish temple then? No, this is exactly the opposite of what Paul was trying to teach them! Did Paul mean to say they had already arrived at heaven? No, they knew they weren't there from the persecutions they were enduring. What did he mean? He meant that these beleaguered Jewish Christians, enduring all sorts of pressures and persecutions, beginning to wonder if they had found in Christianity what their illustrious prophets had promised concerning Mt. Zion, the Messianic kingdom, **HAD INDEED COME TO THE MOUNT ZION THE PROPHETS SO GLOWINGLY PORTRAYED!** The church is Mount Zion! The church is the redeemed of God! The church is what the prophets saw and painted in words contemporary with their own times! (Isaiah speaks of the future glory of Zion throughout his book.) The church is New Israel and members of the church are Jews who are Jews inwardly, spiritually and not literally, (cf. Rom. 2:28-29). Well, I could go on and on, multiplying scripture after scripture from Matthew to Revelation

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showing you that the prophetic promises of God were intended to be fulfilled in Christ and the church, but there are a few other things I would like to say. Suffice it to say here as unequivocally and firmly as I know how—THE CHURCH IS NOT A PARENTHESIS . . . IT IS NOT A STOP-GAP MEASURE! THESE ARE THE LAST DAYS . . . THEY HAVE BEEN EVER SINCE THE CHURCH WAS ESTABLISHED AND WILL BE UNTIL THE CHRISTIAN AGE IS OVER . . . AND THEN WILL COME AN END TO THE AGES . . . THERE ARE NO MORE AGES AFTER THIS ONE! I suggest for a thorough study of New Testament Interpretation of Old Testament Prophecy that you buy for your own library a copy of a book by the same name, authored by James D. Bales. Another discussion of this subject is contained in a series of articles in "The Voice of Evangelism," by Burton W. Barber, Spring of 1957, entitled, "Christ is Now Sitting Upon David's Throne."

h. LITERARY ASPECTS OF PROPHETIC WRITING: The prophets, being Oriental, were more poetic than prosaic. Even their prose was written poetically. The prophets were not interested in producing an "objective, news-reporting" type of literature. They were called to stir the complacent, terrify the impenitent, enrage the indifferent, encourage the downtrodden and strengthen and comfort the disheartened. They were called upon by God to paint such a vivid picture of the future glory of Zion that their contemporaries and generations to follow could endure the onslaughts of materialism, idolatry, and even the maniacal rage of Antiochus Euphianes (Epimanes the Jews called him). Prophecy, as found in the Old Testament, best fits the description of poetic literature, when we consider its creative results. Prophecy is able to stimulate emotion and draw a definite response from the one who reads. He may dislike it, he may hate it, he may never touch it again, but he reacts. A man may not like the O.T. Prophets because they lay bare his heart, he may love them for their beauty and pristine sacredness, but once reading, he will never be the same. Poetry, whether found in the Bible or elsewhere, is granted a license of extravagance. Prophetic figurative language furnished gorgeous chariots for the conveyance of the emotionally-intended message God had for His people. Many figures of speech were used. Inanimate objects acted or reacted. Parallelism is an outstanding characteristic of Hebrew prophecy as well as Hebrew poetry. Proverbs, parables, fables, hyperboles, types, symbols, doom song, rhapsody vision, drama—all were used to get people excited, to move them to action concerning the very critical hour in which they lived.

HOW MAY I PREACH MORE EFFECTIVELY FROM THE PROPHETS? THIS IS THE FIRST STEP!

HOW TO PREACH FROM THE PROPHETS ANALYZATION

Under this heading I want to discuss briefly a topical analyzation of the prophets. John P. Milton in his book, "Preaching From Isaiah," suggests a number of subjects which might also be discussed from the view of all the other literary prophets. Kyle M. Yates in his book, "Preaching From the Prophets," lists at the end of each chapter a number of "Practical Lessons Of Permanent Value," which would help a great deal in suggesting sermon material. There is also the wealth of biographical material available on most of the prophets. Be careful, however, that you have become thoroughly acquainted with a man like Jeremiah, his times, his writings, before you begin to preach about him as a person or you will not do his biography justice. It is an almost unforgiveable sin for a preacher to get up a hastily prepared sermon from any part of the prophets without thorough preparation as to the background of the time, understanding of the prophetic way of expression, and all the other principles I have discussed.

Some of the themes that might be considered for preaching from the prophets—which by the way are as relevant today as they were then—are:

a. **THE HOLINESS OF GOD:** He is the absolute One, there is none other like Him. He is absolutely pure, righteous, just, merciful, tender and loving and longsuffering (Hosea). He will not tolerate rebellion in any form unless it is repented of. His holiness includes His transcendence. Isaiah saw Him, high and lifted up. It includes His objective personality. God cannot be reduced to ideas or feelings. He cannot be forced into a "buddy-buddy" relationship with man. He is not merely a psychological necessity. His thoughts are not our thoughts and His ways are not our ways. My, how this needs to be preached today!

b. **THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD:** The God of the O.T. prophets is not provincial. He is not, as one Disciples of Christ publication, depicts Him, the patriarchal God of the mountains whom Moses went up and rescued and put in a box (the ark) and then had carried over into the Promised Land whom the prophets then rescued from the box. The prophets depict God as sovereign over all the thoughts, feelings and deeds of all men everywhere. Amos reveals that the heathen nations surrounding Palestine were specifically held responsible by God for their sin. Daniel offers no equivocation when he tells Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar that they are responsible to Jehovah God for their wickedness. God is the Sovereign of the universe. No one escapes respon-

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sibility to Him. Any action against His Word or against His people is an action against Him, for which the rebel will have to answer!

c. **SIN:** Many sins are listed by the prophets, vividly, disgustingly, in all their horridness and terrifying consequences; drunkenness, idolatry, adultery (each one neighing for his neighbor's wife), cheating, lying, robbing, bribery, murder. But these are simply the symptoms of what the prophets depict sin to really be: unfaithfulness to His covenant! This, of course, is a result of pride and an attitude of independence from the One who took them as a foundling child from the doorsteps of Egypt, nurtured them into a beautiful maiden, married them, then to have them commit adultery (spiritually speaking)—this is Hosea's and Ezekiel's picture of their sin! We could go on and on with this subject. Sin should be denounced today like the prophets did. God made Ezekiel into old "flint face" so that he might preach against sin unflinchingly, courageously and impartially. We should also use the prophetic literature to preach to our contemporaries of the anarchistic, destructive, death-dealing consequences of sin. Both Israel and Judah ended their national existence in a state of political, social and religious anarchy because of the rampages of unchecked sin against the Word of God.

d. **REPENTANCE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS:** The prophets plainly show that repentance and righteousness are a direct result of faith in Jehovah God. Hosea paints a horrible picture of decadence . . . "There is no faithfulness or kindness, and no knowledge of God in the land; there is swearing, lying, killing, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds and murder follows murder . . ." (Hosea 4:1-2). In order that people might live righteously they must have faith in God (depicted by the prophets as trust which issues forth in obedience to His revelation). In order to have faith, they must know Jehovah. In order that they may know Him, they must have His omniscience and omnipotence proven to them. They must be convinced of His authority. Hosea gives the reason for their reprobation. Ephraim has played the harlot (that is, spiritual adultery, idolatry, going after other Gods). "Their deeds do not permit them to return to their God. For the spirit of harlotry is within them, and they know not the Lord" (Hos. 5:4). How will they be turned from this spirit of harlotry? How will God win back their affections? How will it be shown them that there is only one God? This brings me to the next topic which is most certainly worthy of being preached upon from the O.T. prophets.

e. **EVIDENCE OF GOD'S EXISTENCE; HIS NATURE; THE IMMUTABILITY OF HIS WORD:** Peter knew what he was talking about when he wrote, "And we have the prophetic word made more sure . . ." (II Pet.

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1:19). The fulfillment of prophecy is an even more sure evidence of the deity of Jesus Christ and the infallibility of His word than the things Peter and others witnessed with their own eyes. Fulfilled prophecies are demonstrations to our very own eyes and mind of the supernatural nature of this Word of God. There is simply no way to rationally, scientifically argue against it. You may subjectively deny it, but you cannot objectively disprove it! Isaiah challenges the false gods of Israel, "Tell us what is to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods . . . Behold you are nothing, and your work is nought; an abomination is he who chooses you . . ." (Isa. 41:23-24). Again, Isaiah, "Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel . . . I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. Who is like me? Let him proclaim it, let him declare and set it forth before me. Who has announced from of old the things to come? Let them tell us what is yet to be . . ." (Isa. 44:6-7). Ezekiel reminds his readers that when they finally see his prophecies come to pass, "Then they will know that I am the Lord." Over and over the prophets themselves appeal to fulfillment of God's word in order to bring the people back to their senses. This is certainly imperative in our day.

f. **WORSHIP:** Some of the most exalted phrases of all the literature available to man are found in the prophets. Why? Because these men were overwhelmed and lifted to the heights of glory by the revelation of God and His plan they were given. What preacher in the Christian Church has not wished he could teach his congregation to be more reverent? We have lost, or have never had, that reverence, awe, respect for God which the prophets of old had. They beheld His Majesty, Glory, Omnipotence, Awfulness, and prostrated themselves bodily before Him, and were never quick to speak in His presence lest they be found irreverent. Words of reverence, adoration, praise, thanksgiving were ever on their lips. Let us then, by preaching from the prophets, reveal to men and women the majesty, glory and holiness of God—let us overwhelm them with the love of God as He is seen fulfilling His covenant according to the prophets, and bring men and women to worship God truly.

Now the best way to preach on these topics from the prophets is to preach expository sermons. This takes work. There is no easy way to preach effective, true-to-God's-word expository sermons. You must thoroughly study the background of history for each prophetic book. You must read and read and read the book until you are empathetic with the prophet. You must analyze and synthesize. You must take each book apart, chapter by chapter, paragraph by paragraph, analyze the

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context, outline it, put it back together again, view it in the proverbial "birds-eye-view," (i.e. each chapter in light of the overall purpose and background of the book). Remembering that its first purpose was its message for the people of the day of the prophet; secondly that everything the prophet said had also an eschatologically forward look to the time of the Messiah and His kingdom; thirdly that the revelation of God's immutability, love, faithfulness in all this is what is most relevant for us. I would suggest that you study some good Old Testament Survey books on the prophets before you begin to preach from them—books like G. Campbell Morgan's, "The Unfolding Message of the Bible;" "The Doctrine of the Prophets," by Kirkpatrick; "Bible Survey," by William Hendriksen; even Edward J. Young's, "An Introduction to the Old Testament," would be helpful. Be careful of selecting books on the prophets written by those with premillennial presuppositions. This a priori approach so clouds the thinking that it obscures the real place each of the books of prophecy has in the overall scheme of God's revelation of His plan of redemption.

APPLICATION

When you have learned to interpret the prophetic message by using correct hermeneutical axioms, and when you have become familiar with the content of their writings then you will begin to grasp one of the greatest truths the Bible has to offer man—a God-centered philosophy of history. This is as relevant as anything could possibly be. It is imperatively contemporary! A philosophy of history determines the political philosophy, social philosophy and religious philosophy an individual or a nation of individuals will take. The reason for so much sin, materialism or complete sensuality is a perverted philosophy of history. On the other hand the hippie anti-mind mood and their anarchistic rejection of mores so necessary to an adhesive society is simply due to a perverted philosophy of history.

In his essay "A Free Man's Worship," Bertrand Russell says that "man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving." The human venture, he says, is the outcome of "accidental collocations of atoms." Consequently, the whole edifice of man's achievement must eventually be "buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins."

The Marxist philosophy of history with its godless dialectical materialism has poisoned millions of minds today. Spengler, who wrote "The Decline of the West" in 1917, said, there is first a "dictatorship of money," followed by man becoming "the slave of the machine," followed

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by the growth of absolutism in government, which leads to race suicide. Schweitzer said, the "suicide of civilization is in process." Sorokin says we are passing through a "grim transition" from sensate values toward social, economic, political, intellectual and moral decay." According to Sorokin we cannot stop the transition from taking place;" we can only hasten the change and make it less violent . . . there is no alternative."

Since the pages of history are strewn with the wrecks of past civilizations, man is forced to ask questions concerning the meaning of history and the relation between specific events and the course of history as a whole. Are there ends that are being achieved and values that are being built up? Is there progress in the direction of rationality, liberty, individuality, justice and human welfare? Is there pattern, order, a plot, a theme, a development that we can discern? What do all these historical events mean? Why do we have the rising and falling of great cultures and civilization? Why do we have wars, famines, natural calamities? Is there any purpose or goal to these things or are they chaotic, unconnected, purposeless events gradually grinding the human race into oblivion?

God knew that the people of the days of the prophets, if they were to be awakened to repentance for their sins on the one hand and brought to trust in the faithfulness of God on the other hand, must be given a God-centered philosophy of history. They must be shown that there is purpose, God-controlled purpose, in all the cataclysmic events falling upon them; plagues of locusts, droughts, earthquakes, wars, captivities and redemptions. If there was to be any people to carry on the purpose of God in the earth, they would have to be made aware that what appeared to be inevitable doom was filled with hope because God was in control of all of it! So God, through the prophets, revealed His omnipotent, omniscient hand in all of history. The rising and falling of world empires, wars, famines, earthquakes, captivities, redemptions—all were shown to be under the control of God and being used to serve His purpose. History is purposeful! It is to have a climax and a consummation. History is headed for a completion which God has planned. History is the process by which God has chosen to reach that goal.

The prophets speak of God as being completely sovereign in history to work His will. There is no realm in which God does not work. He is the Dynamic behind daily events as well as historic happenings of world-wide import. If the prophets teach one thing, it is that God's sovereignty in history cannot be challenged. Though evil empires may rise, still God controls. Though world-shaking events transpire, God still is on His throne. His ultimate victory is inevitable. No one will ever

dethrone God. Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Cyrus, Darius, Alexander the Great, Antiochus Ephiphanes, Ceasar, all tried, but God's purpose and plan was not in the least hindered. His plan reached its climax exactly at the time, in the place, and in the manner in which it was foretold.

History is not chance, but plan; not fate, but God. History is purposeful. There is a design and a Designer in the course of events. When one studies the prophets, he cannot but help cry out with the hymn writer of old, "Faith is the Victory!" What is the goal of history? It is: Redemption! Man has sinned, but through history God is effecting redemption. With every event, God is bringing history to a logical conclusion. His goal and His purpose is immutable. Though world powers come and go, they shall never deter God's purpose; that being to effect redemption, and to establish forever His supremacy. It is evident that each event is not a separate entity in itself, but is an integral part of the whole course of events. Prophecy views events in their relation to the total Divine purpose.

Fairbairn in his book "Prophecy" says, "History is the occasion of prophecy, but not its measure; for prophecy rises above history, borne aloft by wings which carry it far beyond the present, and which it derives, not from the past occurrences of which history takes cognizance, but from Him to whom the future and the past are alike known. It is the communication of so much of His own supernatural light as he sees fit to let down upon the dark movements of history, to show whither they are conducting. For the most part, the persons who live in the midst of events are the least capable of understanding aright the character of their age. But God is elevated above it, and, by the word of prophecy, he so informs the minds of his people in respect to the end that they come also to know better than they could otherwise have done the beginning and the middle."

Edward J. Young in his book "The Study of Old Testament Theology Today," says, "It is necessary today to stress the importance of history. Remove from it its historical basis and there is no true Christianity. For the Christian religion is founded squarely upon certain things which God did in history. Remove from it its historical basis and there can be no true study of Old Testament theology . . . in the fulness of time, God entered the realm of history in a unique way. He sent forth His Son, and the second person of the Trinity became man. To Him the kings, and priests, and prophets of the Old Testament dispensation pointed. And in Him was the fulfillment, for He was the true Prophet, Priest and King, and it was He who by a definite act in history, namely His atoning death and resurrection healed the breach between man and God and brought salvation to the earth."

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Merrill C. Tenney, in his book "The Reality of the Resurrection," says, "The historical evidence supporting the resurrection, because it is forever engraved in history's archives, is still as valid as it has ever been . . . Because this divine act is a part of recorded experience, it is proof in understandable terms that God can transcend death by life and that He has opened a new dimension of existence to believers in Christ . . . The resurrection demands the attention of those who contemplate the basic problems of death and life, for it has thrust into them a new factor which must be included in evaluating the whole of human experience . . . Any attempt to explain the processes of history will be incomplete without it . . . the resurrection is permanently relevant to any scheme of thought . . . THE EVENT IS FIXED IN HISTORY, THE DYNAMIC IS POTENT FOR ETERNITY!"

This is what the prophets had to say to the people of their day! In God's own good time He was going to historically fulfill the covenant promise He had made with Abraham. In the meantime, the prophet's whole purpose was to interpret for the people of their day the historic events of the past and the present and predict historic events of the future all in a matrix of a God-controlled and God-purposed philosophy of history. This they did by showing great spans of secular history, as much as 600 years at a time (Daniel), leading to the greatest of all historical events, the coming of the Messiah and His kingdom.

Isaiah prophesies, "On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wine on the lees well refined. And he will destroy on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death for ever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth for the Lord has spoken." Isa. 25:6-8. This, my friend, was the climax of all the history toward which the prophets depict God moving relentlessly, immutably, actively, lovingly. It was climaxed when God swallowed up death forever in the resurrection of Jesus Christ the greatest event ever to transpire (excluding, of course, the second Advent).

This is what our world needs today! This is the application of O.T. prophecy we must make today! God-consciousness! Every individual must come to know intellectually and experientially that God's purposes are going to be served; that His purposes are holy, righteous, just, eternal and joyous. The world must surrender to a God-centered philosophy of history. Then it will be able to overcome all the fiery darts of the evil one. Then it will stop its headlong plunge into spiritual schizophrenia!

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It will lose its debilitating pessimism! It will break its bitter bonds of hopelessness! Then men and women will be able to say with Habakkuk:

Though the fig tree do not blossom,
nor fruit be on the vines,
the product of the olive fail
and the fields yield no food,
the flock be cut off from the fold
and there be no herd in the stalls,
yet will I rejoice in the Lord,
I will joy in the God of my
salvation.

God, the Lord, is my strength;
he makes my feet like hinds'
feet,
he makes me tread upon my
high places.

Habakkuk 3:17-19