

Unit 2 Introduction

The Prophets Proclaim God's Good News

We like to hear good news: the birth of a child, a raise in salary, the safe return home of a soldier. As we read through the books of the prophets, it seems that there is little, if any good news; only messages of doom, despair, and agony. However, the prophets' messages are often meant to help God's people to make good choices and to avoid the paths that lead to the wrong way.

Helpful Messages of Avoidance

As I left home one morning and started to make a right turn, I noticed a bright orange warning sign. The road was closed so that the bridge could be replaced. It was a little frustrating because I had to make a detour of several miles which made me late to an appointment. Now, I could have ignored the warning, driven through the barricade, and ended up in the creek. That would have been rather foolish to say the least.

The opening words of Isaiah are harsh. There seems to be no hope, no peace. But as we continue to read the first two chapters we find that God's warnings were meant to turn the people in the right direction. If they would obey God's warnings against corruption, rebellion, and injustice, the people would know security from enemies, justice in the nation (1:24-27), the presence of God, and the end of war between nations (2:2-4). Who wouldn't want to live in a land such as Isaiah describes?

Jeremiah's message is perhaps the most gloomy of all the prophets. He lived in a time when the nation of Judah was threatened with destruction. The threat became a reality when the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar took the city of Jerusalem and burned it (586 BC). Yet Jeremiah also offered the people reconciliation, the restoration of both nations, Israel and Judah. If they would heed God's call to repentance, the people would be saved and their land would prosper (3:14-18). God sent His prophets with messages of warnings, not to discourage them, but to help them choose the path of obedience that would lead to peace, security, and prosperity. In the midst of the darkest gloom, God holds out the good news of hope for those who listen.

Promise of Restoration

When people do not respond to God's warnings, punishment may follow. As Jeremiah warned, the cities of Judah were destroyed and the nation was taken into exile in Babylon. However, destruction

and punishment were not God's final word. Jeremiah also saw a time of restoration. Cities would be rebuilt. People would rejoice and sing songs. A new leader would replace the former kings who rejected God's warnings, a leader who would follow close and devote himself to God (30:16-24).

The city of God, Zion itself would be rebuilt and the people would again worship there. God's people would be redeemed and come from the nations to which they were exiled. The land would once again bring forth a great harvest of wine, olive oil, and flocks and herds. They would again dance and sing for joy (31:1-14).

The prophet Hosea had a difficult home life. His wife Gomer was unfaithful and bore him children who were not his own. His marriage illustrated Israel's unfaithfulness to God and God's response of punishment for that nation (2:2-13). But God was not willing to cast Israel aside. He would allure Israel back into the wilderness.

The imagery of 2:14-23 is drawn from the time Israel left Egypt and was led by God through the wilderness of Sinai. Hosea portrays it as a time of courtship with God the husband and Israel the bride. A new covenant would be established, a covenant with nature, such as the animals of the fields and sky, and the bounty of the earth, "the grain, the new wine and the olive oil." All her needs would be met. In addition, God would protect her from her enemies, abolishing from the land "bow and sword and battle."

Both Amos and Hosea were prophets in Israel about the same time, late in the reign of Jeroboam II (786-746 BC). Amos condemned Israel's distortion of justice such as the extortion of the poor by the rich (2:6-8). Although the Lord was willing to forgive their sins if they repented (5:4-6a), Israel rejected His offer and continued on the path of destruction at the hands of the Assyrians (722 BC). Death was not God's final word. At the end of Amos' book God promises restoration (9:11-15). The ruined cities would be rebuilt and the land would be restored and produce bountiful harvests, wine from the vineyards and fruit from the gardens.

The priest Ezekiel was taken to Babylon in the first exile when King Jehoiachin surrendered Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar (587 BC). Although he too foresaw the destruction of Jerusalem (12:12-16; 14:12-20), he also saw a time of reconciliation and renewal. The temple would be restored (chs. 40-42), the glory of God would return to the temple (43:1-12), and the nation of Israel would be fully restored (chs. 45-48).

The prophet of the exile also saw a new day dawning for God's people. From the "farthest corners" God would call them and help them be restored. Their enemies would be defeated. Their needs would be supplied and they would once again "rejoice in the LORD and glory in the Holy One of Israel" (Isaiah 41:8-20).

The People of God

Although Israel and Judah suffered greatly for their sins, God never deserted them. To the people in exile God called out, "Comfort, comfort my people, Says your God" (Isaiah 40:1). They were His people and he was "the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior (43:3). The One who "laid the foundations of the earth" proclaimed "You are my people" (51:16). He could no more forget His people than could "a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne" (49:15).

Jeremiah announced that in the future, that is after the exile, God would restore His people and proclaim, "So you will be my people, and I will be your God" (30:22). In addition, God would make a new covenant "with the people of Israel . . . and they will be my people" (v. 33).

Ezekiel wrote that the Sovereign Lord would gather them from the nations where He had driven them. The people would learn to follow His laws and "they will be my people and I will be their God" (11:17-20). Then His people would live in the land that God had given their ancestors, the land of Israel (30:28).

During the early reign of Darius I (522-486 BC) the prophet Zechariah announced that God was going to save His people by gathering them from the nations. He would bring them back to Jerusalem and, "they will be my people, and I will be faithful and righteous to them as their God" (8:7-8). They would call upon Him and He would respond: "I will say, 'They are my people,' and they will say, 'The LORD is our God'" (13:9).

Through all the trials and difficulties the people of God went through, He never deserted them. He sustained them and watched over them until the time was right to gather them from the nations and lead them home to Jerusalem.

A New Leader

Isaiah knew that a major part of the problem of Judah was its poor leadership. King Ahaz (735-715 BC) worshiped other gods and even sacrificed his son as a burnt offering (2 Kings 16:3). Yet God was merciful and through the ministry of Isaiah promised Ahaz deliverance in time of war. Even then he was reluctant to trust

God and tried His patience. Isaiah, rather frustrated with this king still delivered a message of salvation. A virgin would give birth to a son who would be called "Immanuel" (7:10-14). Later Isaiah again prophesied about the birth of a son who's rule would bring peace to the people. He would be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (9:6-7). The Spirit of God would be upon this new ruler and he would rule with righteousness and justice (11:1-4).

Jeremiah also knew that God would not leave His people without a leader. While the people were in exile their king was the ruler of Babylon. When God would bring His people back to their land and rebuild the ruined cities, He would also raise up a ruler from among His people, "one of their own;" one who would devote himself to following God closely and thus bringing rejoicing and honor to the people (30:17-21).

Micah who spoke during the reigns of Ahaz and Hezekiah also saw a time when God would restore peace and security to His people. At that time Judah was threatened by Assyria, the dominant world power (735-688 Bc) His prophecy, as prophecy often does, had a two-fold meaning. God would deliver them from the Assyrians, which he did (2 Kings 19:35). Yet this new Ruler would come from Bethlehem Ephrathah, a small clan in Judah. He would arise at a later time and his rule would bring security to the people "for his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth" (Micah 5:1-6). Here is a fore-glimpse of the birth of Jesus.

God's Spirit

The prophets knew that more was needed than just the return of the people to the land of Israel and Judah. They needed a change of life, a new spirit within. With Israel's restoration to the land Ezekiel prophesied that God would cleanse them and give them "a new heart and put a new spirit in (them)." God said that He would put His Spirit in them so that they might "follow (His) decrees and be careful to keep (His) laws" (36:25-27).

Joel also saw a new day when God would pour out His Spirit on His people and their sons and daughters would prophesy (2:28).

The prophets do speak about warnings and destruction. However, they also point us to God's love that brings reconciliation, salvation through a coming Savior, and a change within by the gift of the Spirit.

ROBERT BRANSON is Professor Emeritus of Biblical Literature at Olivet Nazarene University.