Minor Prophets
Dr. Gary Yates
Session 2: The Ministry and the Message of the Prophets
Part II

This is Dr. Gary Yates in his lecture series on the Minor Prophets. This is lecture number two on the overview of the Book of the Twelve, Part Two.

Summary
In this session, Dr. Yates expounds on the message and the purpose of the message of the Minor Prophets. The prophets are not hysterical babblers, angry ranters, or just foretellers of the future. The prophets are vessels of God’s message, watchmen, men who warn the people about God’s impending judgment on them; they know what they are not supposed to do, and they know the punishments doled out for each disobedient act. The prophets are men who urgently warn the people that God is going to judge our sins. However, Yates also points out the illogical grace that God deals out to his people. Yates wants to show us all that the prophets teach against because their messages are still relevant; he also wants us to see how often Israel sinned against God and how often God forgave Israel; this shows the intensity and the richness of God’s love for his people.

Overview and Review
Our second session is going to continue just introducing the message of the prophets. We are focusing in this study on the Book of the Twelve, or the Minor Prophets. One of the things I want to encourage you with is that we should not be afraid of studying the Minor Prophets; this is not something that you have to be a professional to do. As pastors and teachers, we should not fear teaching these books, and hopefully some of the things that we’re covering, even just about their basic ministry and message, will give us kind of a basic understanding that will help us with that.

I want to continue just helping us to focus on the covenantal aspect of the ministry and the message of the prophets and then in this lesson, particularly, to clear up some
misunderstandings or misconceptions of the prophets that I think have limited our use of them in the churches.

First of all, as a way of review, remember that the prophets are messengers of the covenants. God made a series of covenants in the Old Testament: The Noahic Covenant, the Abrahamic Covenant, the Mosaic Covenant, the Davidic, and the New Covenants, and the prophets' messages as messengers of God’s covenants are based on those specific arrangements that God has made with different individuals.

The message of the prophets is summarized in the four parts from *Grasping God’s Word*: You have sinned and you have broken the covenant; you need to repent, and the word “repentance” in the Old Testament is *shuv*, “to turn around.” “If there is no repentance,” the prophets warned, “there is going to be a judgment, and that judgment is primarily going to take the form of exile.” Then, fourth, based on the promises of the covenant and God’s abiding commitment to the promises that he’s made, there will be a restoration.

**Prophet as Watchman**

I want to continue looking at the covenantal aspect of the message of the prophets, and one of the roles that the prophets is given, and one of the ways that they describe their ministry, is that they will refer to themselves as the watchmen of God; and that’s one of the terms that’s going to be used. A watchman in ancient Israel or in the ancient world (we get a picture of this in 2 Samuel 18) were men that would stand on the tops of city walls, and they would warn the people living in that town, and living in that city, that an enemy was approaching. They would announce the arrival of different visitors or messengers. So that’s the role of the prophets.

God raises up the classical prophets, the writing prophets from the 8th century forward, as a way of warning the people of the judgments that are coming. There is going to be judgment through the Assyrian crisis. There is a series of prophets that God raises up to warn people about that; there is going to be war, there is going to be judgment in the Babylonian crisis. The Babylonians are coming; they’re on their way. There are
prophets that come and warn the people of Judah about that. In the post-exilic period, even though they are back in the land, there is still the possibility of experiencing more judgment, and, ultimately, the people are going to have to turn back to God before they experience a full restoration. So the prophets are like these men that stood on the wall and announced the arrival of an impending army or an impending enemy.

Sometimes a watchman would stand in a vineyard, in a hut, or in a shelter, and they would watch over that vineyard for the owner, and that was part of the role of the prophets in Israel as well. In Ezekiel 33 there is a reflection on Ezekiel's role as a prophetic watchman, and here's what the Lord says beginning in verse 1: “The word of the Lord came to me and said: ‘Son of man, speak to your people and say to them, "If I bring the sword upon the land and the people of the land, take a man from among them and make them their watchman. And if he sees the sword coming upon the land and blows the trumpet and warns the people, then, if anyone who hears the sound of the trumpet does not take warning, and the sword comes and takes him away, his blood shall be upon his own head. He hears the sound of the trumpet and does not take warning. His blood shall be upon himself. But if he had taken warning, he would have saved his life. But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet so that the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes one of them away, that person is taken away in his iniquity but his blood I will require at the watchman’s hand."’

If we’re messengers of God, we’re spokesmen for God; so this passage, in some way, applies to all of us. The prophets had an obligation to warn the people of the judgment that was coming. If they fulfilled that obligation and the people chose not to listen, the responsibility for the judgment and the bloodshed that would come upon them would be on the people for rejecting the message. However, if a prophet was called by God to warn the people, God revealed to him what was in the near future, and the prophet did not have the courage or the conviction to preach the message that God had given to him, then, ultimately, the prophet himself would also be held responsible for the judgment that came upon the people.
Covenant Curses

There are a number of places in the Old Testament prophets that refer to these prophets as watchmen, and the reality is that they were warning about the judgments that God was bringing, but the people did not listen to those warnings. Jeremiah chapter 6, verse 17, says, “The trumpet has been blown.” There is a crisis coming; that trumpet is a warning sign, but the people have not listened, and they have not obeyed. Now, specifically, when the prophets talk about judgment, in light of the fact that it’s based on the covenant, the judgments that are going to be announced by the prophets are specifically, in many ways, the judgments and the curses that are announced in the covenant curses that Moses laid out in Leviticus 26 and in Deuteronomy 28.

Again, reviewing what we said in the first session, those curses involved curses in nature: there was going to be blight; there was going to be mildew; they would have a lack of rain, and their crops would not produce. This was an incredible land that God was bringing them to, but if they did not obey God, then that land was going to blighted and cursed. There were also going to be military curses, and they [Israel] would become the tail of the nations rather than the head. They would be subjected to military defeat; they would become like Sodom and Gomorrah in the way that they were overthrown.

Ultimately, the final warning that God gave to His people is that there would be judgment of exile, and they would be removed from the land if they did not obey God. Deuteronomy pictures this as the people of God being actually taken back to Egypt. We know from the prophets that they are going to be taken into exile to various places: to Assyria, to Babylon, to Egypt.

But the prophets are not just warning them of a random series of judgments; the prophets are specifically invoking upon them the covenant curses that are laid out in Deuteronomy 28/Leviticus 26. Now when you go back and read those passages, the Lord sets in front of them: “Here are blessings that you will enjoy. Here are curses that you will experience if you disobey. Seek the Lord and live. You can choose between life and death.” The interesting thing in those passages is that the blessing section is often very short. I think in Deuteronomy 28, less than 10 or 12 verses. The cursing part of this is the
long part because God knows the inclination of the people’s heart. He wants to warn them right up front of the seriousness of this and the likelihood and the reality are: they’re going to experience these curses because they have a long history of not following the Lord and doing what the Lord tells them.

We get an idea of the covenant curses that are going to come upon Israel in Isaiah 1:5-8. Remember, Isaiah is a prophet that God raises up during the Assyrian crisis, and so he pictures what it’s like for the people as the Assyrian army invades and comes through the land. We read in external sources outside of the Old Testament that when the Assyrians came into the land of Judah, they captured 46 cities in Judah, and they trapped Hezekiah during the 8th century “like a bird in a cage.” Well, I think that’s the background to what Isaiah says in chapter 1 verses 5-8. Isaiah says, “Why will you be struck down? Why will you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick; the whole heart is faint. From the sole of the foot even to the head there is no soundness in it but bruises and sores and raw wounds. They are not pressed out or bound up or softened with oil.” So the whole land is pictured here as this bloodied, bruised, battered individual who is sickened because of these injuries. That’s what the Assyrian army ultimately inflicted on the people of Israel. That’s what Moses had warned about in Deuteronomy 28. You’re going to be the tail rather than the head because you’re going to be subjected to these enemies and all the things that they will do to you. Isaiah goes on to say, “Your country lies desolate; your cities are burned with fire. In your very presence, foreigners devour your land. It is desolate as if overthrown by foreigners. The daughter of Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a lodge in a cucumber field, like a besieged city. Why had those things happened? Because those were the specific covenant curses that God had promised to bring against the people of Israel.

Now, the Minor Prophets are going to do the exactly the same thing. As we look at the judgments that they talk about, we also understand what these are exactly. We can line them up in an exact way with the covenant curses that are found in Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 26. Now, I think one of the best examples of this is found in Amos 4, where Amos is preaching to the people. Remember, Amos is also during this Assyrian
crisis. He’s warning them about judgment that is coming. But in the book of Amos, he also talks about judgment that has already come. The judgments that have already come, as he mentions them, they’re not just a random list of natural disasters, they are specific things that God is going to do to the people of Israel, mentioned back in the covenant curses, Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, if they did not obey God.

Listen to Amos chapter 4 verse 6: “I gave you cleanness of teeth in all of your cities and a lack of bread in all of your places.” Cleanness of teeth is not dental hygiene; it’s a lack of food. So the Lord has cursed their crops. Then Amos says this: “‘Yet, you did not return to me,’ declares the Lord.” The Lord says, “Look! I’ve done these things; I brought these disasters on you as a way of getting your attention. There’s more judgment to come if you don’t change your ways. You haven’t returned to me! Why don’t you wake up and understand what it is that I’m doing, why these disasters are happening to you?”

Verse 7: “I also withheld the rain from you when there were yet three months to the harvest. I would send rain on one city, but I would not send it on another.” One field would have rain and on the field, which it did not rain, it would wither. So two or three cities would wander around to another city to drink water and would not be satisfied.

That was one of the things that Deuteronomy had talked about: the Lord would turn the sky to bronze. In the land of Israel, rain was always an issue. Getting enough rain and making sure that they had rain for the crops: that was always a problem. So when the Lord withheld that in various places, that was a reminder to the people they had not lived up to their covenant responsibilities.

But Amos says; “Yet, you did not return to me. I gave you a lack of food; that didn’t get your attention. I gave you a lack of rain that affected your crops as well; that didn’t get your attention.” Verse 9: “I struck you with blight and mildew, your many gardens and your vineyards, your fig trees and your olive trees, the locusts devoured. Yet, you did not return to me.” Other specific covenant curses are mentioned here. The blighting, the disease of their crops so that it could not produce and be the land flowing with milk and honey that God had promised, the invasion of locus coming through the
land, specific curses that are laid out in Leviticus 26/Deuteronomy 28—all of these are
curses in nature.

Verse 10: “I sent among you a pestilence after the manner of Egypt. I killed your
young men with a sword and carried away your horses, and I made the stench of your
camp go up into your nostrils, yet you did not return to me.” So now, we’re beginning to
move to the curses that they experienced as military curses. They had been defeated by
their enemies. They had experienced disease that took their children away from them.

Verse 11: “I overthrew some of you as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and
you were as a brand plucked out of the burning. Yet you did not return to me.”
Deuteronomy/Leviticus again say, “One of the curses that I will bring on you people if
you do not obey God is: ‘I will overthrow you as I did Sodom and Gomorrah, the
ultimate example of disobedience and wickedness.’”

The Prophets: Watchmen Warning about God’s Judgment

So God has sent a series of covenant curses. These, in a sense, have been
preemptive strikes. What Amos is warning them about is the fact that there is a greater
judgment coming, and the ultimate judgment, the ultimate covenant curse, is going to be
the judgment of exile. We often have this misunderstanding of the prophets as if they are
these ranting, raving fanatics who are simply angry about everything that’s going on in
their culture and in their society. Actually, they are doing the people a service because
they are warning these people. If God’s intention was simply to destroy them or wipe
them out, God could have done that without sending his prophets. The prophets are
warning them as a way of trying to help them avoid the further disasters that are coming.
Because of that, there’s an urgency in their message. And one of the things as a pastor
and as a teacher that I’m reminded of as I read the prophets, our message is urgent. The
message that we’re telling people about God’s kingdom, and the gospel, and calling
people to repentance, it’s a life and death message. The prophets were urgent because
their message was a life and death message. Whether the people lived or died depended
on how they listened to this message.
I was a college student in 1979 in Florida, and I had the opportunity to experience, first-hand, a hurricane. I was in Florida during the time of Hurricane David. Foolishly, having never seen this before, I decided that I wanted to go down to the beach and actually observe it firsthand. I remember as we were going down before the storm hit, the day before it got there, there was a policeman stationed on the bridge going over the inner coastal waterway. When we told him that we were going over to the beach, he emphatically, using some colorful metaphors, told us to get out of there. And he was wisely warning us about something. He wasn’t being polite; he wasn’t being friendly at that particular point in time; he was urgently warning us of something. I think when we listen to the prophets and as they’re talking about judgment, we should be reminded of that. They are speaking an urgent message.

I was driving down the highway a few months on a trip, and the sound of the emergency broadcasting networking came across; they were testing their tornado warning system. It sort of diminished my urgency about the message when I found out that it was a test. But if that had been a real message, it would’ve been imperative for me at that particular time to have taken action. So the prophets are going to explain, and they’re going to warn of God’s judgment, using the most severe terms possible because they want the people to understand how serious this is.

Brent Sandy, when he talks about the prophets in his book *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*, talks about the prophets’ message being like whitewater when we’re rafting. There it is an exaggerated message in the worst, most extreme, terms possible. They want us to see how horrible the judgment is going to be. Jeremiah is going to say, “As God brings judgment against his people, it is going to be like death climbing through the window.” The prophet Joel talks about God’s judgment; and Joel, in the postexilic period, after they have already been away in exile, is going to say, “You’ve experienced this locus plague where God has devastated your crops. Well, the day of the Lord is at hand, and if you don’t learn from that—and the danger is that an army—a physical human army the size of a locus plague is about to invade your land. You need to wake up and realize about what’s going to happen.”
Amos, when he talks about it, he says, “As the judgment comes, 90 percent of the people will be either killed or taken away into exile.” Nine out of ten. In one place he talks about the remnant, the left-overs, the survivors of this, and he says, “When the Assyrian army comes through, when this invading army comes through, Israel is going to be left like a sheep that has been pulled out of the mouth of a lion.” That’s a vivid picture, and he said, “All that’s going to be left is a piece of the tail, a bit of a leg, a part of an ear.” That’s what Israel is going be like—an animal that’s been ripped apart. So the prophets are going to take us through the whitewater of God’s wrath. The judgment is going to be as bad and as awful as this, and this is part of their role and their ministry as the watchmen of God.

**Restoration**

But the other side of that, and I think the other part of that whitewater, is that the prophets are going to also help us to understand the depths of God’s love. So as I’ve studied the prophets, and I talked about in the last video, it’s enabled me to fall in love with the God of the prophets; and that’s the thing about these books that consumes me. I want to seek that God. It’s not just an angry God; it’s not just a God who wants to consume his people; but it is also a God who is committed to them no matter what. My kids may do some horrible things, but I’m always going to love them as a father. In a greater way, God is always going to be committed to his children.

The covenants that God made with Israel placed conditions upon them that stipulated they would be judged if they disobeyed, and they would be punished severely if they did not keep God’s commands. But the prophets are going to come back constantly to the idea that the Lord will never abandon his people.

So after this judgment, there is always going to be a restoration. I tell my students that if you’re ever getting ready for an ordination exam, and someone wants to ask you the question, “What’s the message of a prophet?” you are safe by answering, “Judgment and salvation.” Your ordination counsel will think that you know the Old Testament really, really well. But there is always judgment and there is always salvation. Now
critical scholars, as they have looked at that, they will often talk about those messages of salvation as being things that were added later to the message of the prophets. But I think one of the problems with that is that in every one of these books, there is always a message of salvation. Amos probably has the most extreme message of judgment in all the Old Testament. Still, at the end of that book (chapters 9:11-15), there is a promise that God is going to restore what he has torn down.

The book of Jeremiah, the first part of the book, is about God’s work of dismantling and tearing down. The second part of the book is about the hope and what God is going to build and plant, and what grows out of that. So there’s definitely, in the prophets, the whitewater of God’s wrath, but there’s also the intense, incredible passion of God’s love for his people and some of the greatest passages about God’s love; and some of the passages that have spoken to me the most in the prophets are the ones that deal with that.

**Examples of God’s Love in the Prophets**

Let me just share a couple of these with you that have meant something to me. In Isaiah 40, when God talks about bringing his people back from exile, he says that “the Lord is going to be like a shepherd, and he is going to carry his people in his arms, and even the most fragile tender lamb, the Lord is going to carry in his arms.” And that gentle picture of the Lord as our shepherd, kind of a living illustration of Psalm 23, that’s what God is going to do for his people when he restores them and brings them back from exile.

In Isaiah 49, the people of Israel say, “the Lord has forgotten me, the Lord has abandoned me. Zion herself speaks and says, “God has forgotten about us.” That would have been a natural response to the disaster that had happened to them. But the Lord responds back to that statement and he says, “Can a nursing mother forget her baby? Even if she could, the Lord will not forget you.” The Lord says that he has the name of Zion on one hand; he has the city of Zion, the image of that, on his other hand. I won’t get into the issue of whether God has a tattoo or not, but what it does seem to say is that
the waking thought of our God who never sleeps, the constant thought, the constant attention, the thing that is always on his mind is the people of God; he will never forget them.

The prophet Jeremiah says to the exiles, “I know the plans that I have for you the plans to give you a hope and a future and I am going to restore you.” That’s not an endless promise to every Christian that God is going to work out every plan in our life; it does mean that God is committed to our ultimate good, just in the same way that Romans 8 tells us that “all things work together for good to them that love God and are called according to his purpose.”

Hosea chapter 11: Hosea is a book where he marries an unfaithful woman as a visual object lesson for the people of Israel of how they have been unfaithful to God. At the end of that book in Hosea chapter 11, the Lord talks about his love for Israel as his wife and he says this, chapter 11 verses 8 and 9: “How can I give you up O Ephraim; how can I hand you over, O Israel?” They have been an unfaithful wife to him, he has every right as God and as the one who has been completely faithful to his covenant to completely consume and destroy these people, but he says, “How can I give you up? I love you; I am committed to you.”

Sometimes we meet someone or as a pastor we do counseling with people and they’re married to someone we wonder what led you to marry that person, how can you stay with them? As we look at the Old Testament we say, “how can God ever be fully committed to Israel as his wife?” But he says, “I can’t give you up.” And he says, “How can I make you like Admah and how can I make you like Zeboiim? Cities that were destroyed along with Sodom and Gomorrah, The Lord says, ‘My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender.’” Even in the midst of his greatest anger, even in the midst of the times when the Lord was punishing his people because they had been unfaithful to him, they had cheated on him like an unfaithful spouse. God says, “my heart grows warm with compassion for you, it grows warm and tender. I will not execute my burning anger. I will not again destroy Ephraim, for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath. I am not a man. I am not going to give
in to vengeance, I am not going to give into revenge, I am not going to completely destroy my people. As a righteous God, as a holy God, I am going to punish them for sin, but I will ultimately restore them.” So the covenant is not just a message of judgment in the prophets, it’s also a message of restoration.

Restoration in Jeremiah

One of my other favorites, Jeremiah chapter 30, and let me just read a brief section. Jeremiah 30-33 is a part of that book that is known as the Book of Consolation, and it’s about God restoring the fortunes of his people after he sent them away into exile. In chapter 30, beginning in verse 12, the Lord says this to the people: “Thus says the Lord: ‘Your hurt is incurable, your wound is grievous. There is none to uphold your cause, there is no medicine for your wound; there is no healing for you. All your lovers have forgotten you; they care nothing about you. For I have dealt you the blow of an enemy, the punishment of a merciless foe because your guilt is great, because your sins are flagrant. Why do you cry out over your hurt? Your pain is incurable because your guilt is great, because your sins are flagrant.’” Everything we read in that passage indicates hopelessness. You have been afflicted; you have this injury that has been placed upon you. There is no healing; there is no balm that is going to take care of this. The lovers, the false gods, the enemies that you turned to, and you thought they were going to be your source of security and significance; they haven’t helped you as well. There is nothing that you can turn to. Why did that happen? The Lord says, “Because your sins are flagrant; you deserve this.” God had not abandoned his covenant with his people, yet they had abandoned the covenant. God had not let them down by failing to protect them from the Babylonian army; they had bought this upon themselves. So everything about this is hopeless from Jeremiah chapter 30, verse 12, down to verse 15.

But notice what it says in verse 16: “Therefore, like Cain.” Okay, here’s the outcome, and we expect this is going to be an awful, devastating message of judgment. But what we have instead is what Tim Keller refers to in this passage as “a beautiful expression of God’s illogical grace: ‘Therefore all who devour you will be devoured. All
of your foes, every one of them, shall go into captivity. Those who plunder you shall be plundered, and all who prey on you I will make a prey. For I will restore health to you; your wounds I will heal,’ declares the Lord, ‘because they have called you an outcast, it is Zion for whom no one cares.’” Everyone else had forgotten about Zion. Everyone else had neglected them to the ash heap of history. God says, “I’m going to restore you. There is no health; there is no healing [deserved, but] I am going to give it to you instead [of judgment].” God is going to do these things because of his abiding covenant commitment to the people of Israel.

One of the qualities of God that we are going to study in this course is what is referred to in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word is *hesed*, and it talks about God’s loyal love, his commitment, his faithfulness. Jeremiah says, “I have loved my people with an everlasting love, and therefore, I have drawn them with my loving kindness, even after exile, even after judgment.”

**Restoration in the Post-Exilic Prophets**

In the Book of the Twelve, there are four prophets—Haggai, Zechariah, Joel, Malachi—that ministered during the time of the postexilic period. They remind us that after the judgment of exile, God is going to bring his people back; God is going to restore them. But something interesting happens in those books as well. We find out there that the people come back to the land, but they still have not fully returned to God. Haggai and Zechariah are going to have to confront them about the fact that they have not rebuilt the temple; they have not yet followed God’s priorities. So there is the potential for more judgment even after exile. Joel: “You have turned away from God; God has brought a locust plague on you. Rend your hearts, turn back to him; there is going to be more judgment.” Malachi: “There is this dispute between God and his people because the people haven’t really turned back to the Lord.”

So even after the restoration, even after they come back to the land, they still haven’t fully turned back to God. So what does God do there? Does God say, “Well, you know, I have given them a chance; I have promised to bring them back. I bring them
back. They still haven’t come back to me!” What God does there to show his abiding concern is that the prophets he ministered through during that time are also going to promise that the Lord is going to cause there to be a return after the return, where there will finally be a full restoration of the people. We look at the time of the postexilic period. It was not the great restoration that seems to be expected in prophets like Isaiah or Jeremiah. It was a depressing, discouraging time; they’re still under foreign oppression. And again, it wasn’t God’s fault; it was the people’s fault.

But what the postexilic prophets are going to do for us is that they are going to complete this message about God’s faithfulness and God’s commitment to Israel, and they’re going to say, “The Lord is going to bring about a return after this return that’s going to ultimately be everything that God imagined. So the prophet Zechariah is going to say in Zechariah chapter 8, verses 7 and 8, “Thus says the Lord of Hosts, ‘Behold, I will save my people from the east country and from the west country. I will bring them to dwell in the midst of Jerusalem, and they will be my people and I will be their God in faithfulness and in righteousness.’” We read that and we say, “Well, I thought that’s what God had done. God had brought them back from exile. God had carried them like the lambs in his arms and brought them back and restored them.” But the Lord says, “This wasn’t the ultimate restoration. There’s going to be one beyond this,” because even though the people persist in their sins, God, in a greater way, persists in his covenant faithfulness.

Zechariah goes on to say at the end of chapter 8:20-23, “Thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘People shall yet come, even the inhabitants of many cities, the inhabitants of one city to another saying, “Let us go up at once to entreat the favor of the Lord and to seek the Lord of hosts. I myself am going up.” Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the Lord of Hosts in Jerusalem and to entreat the favor of the Lord.’ Thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘In those days, ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of the Jews, saying, “Let us go up with you, for we have heard that God is with you.”’”

So the prophets, when the return was not everything that it was imagined to be, they didn’t simply say, “Well, I guess, you know, Isaiah was too idealistic; it didn’t work
out the way God had said.” They did not say, “Look, you’ve disobeyed, you forfeited, you gave away your blessing.” What they remind the people of is, “The Lord is going to bring about this ultimate restoration; the Lord is going to keep his promises; the Lord will write the law on your heart; the Lord will bring back his people completely from their exile. And when he does, even the nations of the earth are going to come and worship.” So this idea of the extremes of God’s judgment is definitely there in the prophets. But there are also the extremes of God’s love.

**Balancing Judgment and Restoration**

So, as you are teaching the prophets, one of the things that you want to make sure that you do is that it’s easy to preach these books and to become very angry or to become legalistic and say, “Here’s the list of sins that you’ve committed,” and really to just beat people down with judgment. But the message of the prophets is also a message of grace that ultimately shows God’s answer and God’s solution. The prophets condemned the idolatry of the people. We have to give people something to love that is greater than their idols and it’s God’s love that ultimately impacts us with that.

Paul in Ephesians chapter 3 says, “I want you to be able to understand the height and the depth and the breath and the length of the love of God.” He uses measuring terms to talk about something that really cannot be measured. One of the things that has helped me to see in my life the depth, and the breath, and the deepness of God’s love for me is to understand the abiding commitment of God’s covenant promises to Israel—how God is committed to these people no matter what.

In Romans chapter 8, Paul reminds us at the end of that great chapter all the things that God has done for us: He’s foreknown us, he’s predestined us to be like the image of his Son, he’s working all things out together for good, he’s even already glorified us and given us that inherence. At the end of that chapter he says, “There is nothing, that we will ever experience in life that can separate us from God’s love that’s in Christ Jesus—famine, hardship, nakedness, persecution, sword, even death itself cannot separate you from God’s love. God’s love is everlasting; it’s eternal; it’s permanent.
It’s interesting as we read the book of Romans, the thing that Paul next turns to in Romans 9-11. How do I know that Romans 8 is true? How do I know that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God that’s in Christ Jesus? Paul turns in Romans 9-11 to God’s relationship with the people of Israel. In Romans 11 he even gives us the promise that part of God’s plan, and part of God’s ultimate design for salvation history, is that in the end, all Israel, the people of Israel, are going to be saved and restored. The way that I know God’s everlasting love for me is I can look and see the example of God’s everlasting love for Israel.

Christians have all kinds of different ideas about the future of Israel and the people of Israel. I believe that the covenants in the Old Testament give us a promise that God has a future for Israel because God keeps his covenant promises, and God is committed to his covenant commands.

**Summary**

After we’ve seen this—the backdrop, the background, the message of the prophets; how it’s oriented to covenant—these four ideas: you’ve sinned, you’ve broken the covenant, you need to repent, if there’s no repentance there’s going to be judgment, and then after the judgment there’s going to be restoration. I hope that some of this helps to clear up some of the common misunderstandings of the prophets, maybe some of the misapprehension you have about either studying these books or teaching them.

**Misunderstandings of the Prophets: Not Hysterical Babblers**

And so, I’d like to conclude this lesson by just thinking about these things; here are some common misunderstandings of the prophets that I think we realize are not accurate when we understand what their message was all about. Some people look at the prophets, and they would dismiss them as nothing more than hysterical babblers. I even watched a documentary on one of the history channels a few years ago and they talked about the prophet Ezekiel and some of the ways that he conveys his message, perhaps reflecting the fact that he had a physiological disorder. That was kind of a prevailing
philosophy. Now, there were often times when the prophets did present their message in a state of ecstasy under the influence of the Spirit of God. We see Saul acting as a prophet in that way. That’s not the normal experience. They are conveying to the people a message that is very clear. It’s built upon the revelation that God has given to his people. They are not hysterical babblers; they are sent as messengers who, in a very clear way, are reminding the people of their covenant responsibilities in a very logical way: you have done this, God is going to do this, here’s the opportunity to repent. Some of the most skillful use of redirect in all of the Bible is found in the Old Testament prophets.

Amos is going to begin his message; he’s sent from the country of Judah in the south to preach to the people in the north. He’s not necessarily going to be welcome there. So Amos begins by talking about the judgment of the nations; and then, when he’s lured the people in and they realize that God’s going to judge the nations, he drops the bomb on them: God is also going to judge you. So the prophets are not hysterical babblers. They’re not simply just under a state of ecstasy. There’s a very clear message here.

**Prophets were not Angry Ranters**

The second misunderstanding is that the prophets are not angry, ranting, messengers of a God who simply want to consume and destroy his people, and we’ve talked about this already. I grew up in a very fundamentalist background, and I remember going to church and hearing evangelists preach, and they would get red in the face and they would scream. When I was ten years old, some of that was pretty scary. They would have this vein on their neck, and it would bulge out, and that, in many ways, before I began to study the prophets, that was my understanding of what they were like. What I think we’ve come to understand is that when they did preach an extreme message, that extreme message was because of the extreme circumstances, and they did not enjoy preaching that message.

Often some of those evangelists, I thought, seemed to enjoy telling people that they were going to hell, or they enjoyed giving us the lists of sin. The prophets don’t
enjoy this. God does not take pleasure in the death of the wicked. Ezekiel tells us that. Second Peter 2 echoes that in the New Testament. God is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. One of the reasons that God sent the prophets in the first place is that if the people would respond to that message, then they could avoid this judgment. The God of the Old Testament is not this angry, raving, maniacal, homicidal, phyllicidal, whatever type of God; He’s a God who cares about people.

The new atheist movement has tried to draw a strong distinction between the God of the Old Testament—angry, judgmental, a God who sends plagues and kills people and commands genocide, and those kinds of things—and the God of the New Testament who is the Father of Jesus and a God of love. There is both judgment and salvation in the message of the prophets. The holiness of God, the hatred of God for sin, that’s there; that’s real; that’s something that we need to preach to our culture. But the other side of this is that there is forgiveness; there is grace; there is restoration. In fact, we have this word from God in Jeremiah chapter 18, “That if people would respond to the message of the prophets, there was always the opportunity that that judgment could be avoided.” Chapter 18, verse 7, says this: “If at any time I declare, concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy, and that nation concerning which I have spoken turns from evil, I will relent from the disaster that I intend to do to it.” We’re even going to see examples as we go through the Minor Prophets where God relents from judgment when people respond to the message. So I think there is in many ways a misunderstanding of the prophets. There is a misrepresentation of the God of the Old Testament. When I hear people saying things about God, he’s my father, I love him, I know his love, I want to defend him, and I want to defend his honor. I think the prophets help us to understand what God is truly like.

Prophets not just Predictors of the Future

A third misunderstanding of the prophets, and this often gets into the way that they have been treated popularly in the church, is that we view the prophets primarily as
“predictors of the future.” Their role was to give us a detailed road map of all of the things that are going to happen in eschatology.

Predicting the future was an important part of the prophets’ message. Deuteronomy 18 told the people that one of the ways that they would distinguish true prophets from false prophets is that anything that a true prophet predicted or promised would come to pass, that would happen. He had to be right one hundred percent of the time. A .950 batting average was not good enough. He was always correct and always accurate. We see the prophets in many ways. They are predicting for the people, “This is what’s going to happen to you if you do not change your ways.” But the primary role of the prophets was not to predict the future. It was, however, a part of their ministry; it was a part of their prophetic gift; it was a demonstration that their word came from God.

In the book of Isaiah, in chapters 40-48 especially, one of the ways that God distinguishes himself from the pagan gods around Israel was that the Lord was able to announce, through his prophets, the future before it ever happened. I think one of the reasons that Isaiah 40-55 gives us this detailed promise about how God was going to bring his people back from exile during the time of Isaiah was to show to them God can predict the future.

But predicting the future was only a small part of the prophet’s message. Someone has broken it down statistically like this: they have said two thirds of the prophets preaching were primarily forth telling. In other words, simply preaching the word of God, doing what pastors do on a Sunday, doing what Elijah and Elisha did when they confronted the people about their commitment to Baal or their apostasy. Two thirds of the preaching was forth telling, only one third of it was foretelling and telling them about things that were going to happen in the future. When we think about the prophets in eschatology, one third of those things that they were foretelling, or predicting, also were things that were going to happen in the near future. They are no longer predictions for us; they are things that have already happened. Fee and Stuart say less than two percent of the prophetic preaching is Messianic prophecy. Less than five percent of the preaching of
the prophets deals with the New Covenant era, and less than one percent of their preaching deals with things that are still going to happen in the eschatological future.

So when we have people, or when we have prophesy spokesmen, or when we have videos that are out being sold online, and we’re coming to the prophets looking for a detailed roadmap of the future, we’re probably not using the prophets for what they were intended. When we think that we can come to the prophets with our Bible in one hand and our newspaper in the other hand, and we can draw direct lines and correspondences, we are probably reading things into the prophets that are not really there. That’s been one of the things that have characterized popular studies of prophets.

There has been a recent study in the last couple of years called the _Harbinger_, talking about Isaiah 9 verses 8-10, being a direct prophesy about America. I don’t know of any specific passages in the Old Testament prophets that directly talk about America. There was a book back in 1988: _Eighty-Eight Reasons Why the Rapture will be in 1988_. You can get that book online now really cheap. The message has been kind of discredited.

When I was in high school, I had an interest in prophesy because I went to go see the movie, _The Late Great Planet Earth_. But in studying the prophets, I’ve come to realize that’s not really their primary focus. When I tell people sometimes, “I teach Old Testament, I teach the prophets,” that usually raises a series of questions, and one of them usually is: “Are we living in the last days?” What they want to know by that is: “Does the Bible indicate that the coming of Christ is soon?” I think that there probably are ways that we could say that, but the biblical perspective is that the last days began with the first coming of Christ and they’re going to continue into the second coming.

There was a book back in 1991 that talked about the Gulf War being a fulfillment of biblical prophecy because of all of the passages in Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Revelation about the judgment of Babylon. Again, I think that’s reading things into the Bible.

People have the question, “What’s going to happen to the state of Israel? Is [the] 1948 [establishment of] Israel a fulfillment of biblical history, of biblical prophecy? The Bible doesn’t answer those questions. That’s not the goal of the prophets. As they look at
the future, they give us primarily what we could refer to as a “soft lens focus on the future,” not a detailed specific roadmap.

As the prophets, as they talk about the future; they remind us of four basic things again and again and again. They are going to remind us that God is going to bring his people back from exile, number one. They’re going to remind us that God will restore the Davidic line. They’re going to remind us that Jerusalem will be rebuilt along with the temple. Finally, they are going to remind us that the future blessing of Israel in the eschatological kingdom is going to lead to the inclusion of all nations. But the exact details and specifics of how all of that is worked out, the prophets don’t always answer those questions. The prophets are not there to satisfy our curiosity; they are more to give us a firm, settled, confidence that ultimately God’s kingdom prevails and God’s people win.

In the prophetic visions of Daniel 2 and Daniel 7, we have a succession of human, worldwide empires ultimately replaced by the kingdom of God. So as I read the prophets, I may not be able to answer all of those questions about eschatology and prophesy that people want to have answered, but I do get a sense that, ultimately, we can know that we’re on the winning side. If I watch a video of my favorite team and I know the score and I know that they win that game, I’m not worried about a fumble in the first half. I’m not worried if they’re down by 10 at half time because I have a settled conviction. I know the ultimate outcome. That’s what the prophets are designed to do for us.

One of the things that I think has divided the church is that often we love to argue about eschatology. We have people who are pre-mil and post-mil and a-mil and we have people who are pre-trib, mid-trib, post-trib—all these various flavors. I think when we really understand what the prophets are about, it may lead us to hold to those ideas with a great deal more humility than sometimes we do. The Bible doesn’t give us the detailed charts and maps that we would like to lay out. I’ve mentioned: I have a conviction that I believe God has a purpose for the people of Israel. I believe that God is going to fulfill his covenant promises to the people of Israel; but the way that that will happen: Is it a
national restoration? Is it simply a spiritual restoration? The Bible doesn’t answer, fully, all of those questions.

The church, in many ways, is a fulfillment of the promises that God made to restore a new people and to create an eschatological community. How does the church and Israel relate to each other? We can have our convictions about those things, but we need to hold to those things with humility. If the world looks at us and sees us fighting over eschatology, then I think it’s hard for them to really see and understand and believe us when we talk about the love of God and the love of Christ.

Prophets are too Hard to Understand

A final misconception—and I think that this is one, as a teacher and a pastor, strikes at me, and it’s one that I have to deal with my students—is the misconception that the prophets are too hard for me to understand, or too difficult for me to preach to my people. When we learn that the basic message of the prophets is judgment and salvation, when we learn that we do not have to fit them into some tight eschatological scheme, I believe that it simplifies the message of the prophets. When we understand the historical context and the things that they are talking about, I think it makes it easier for us to apply and to understand what’s going on. When we realize that the prophets use highly figurative language, and that we don’t necessarily need to find an explicit fulfillment in every detail, I think, instead of making the message harder, it makes it simpler. One of the things that we have done is that I think we have taken the message of the prophets and we’ve made it much too difficult.

Summary / Conclusion

The prophets are going to focus on three major application issues. They are going to talk to the people about their idolatry. They are going to talk to the people about the problem of social justice. They are going to talk to people about the problem of insincere and false worship. We have those same issues in the church today, and if you’re a pastor, I want you to just simply think about what is missing from your church, [especially] if the
prophets are not part of the spiritual diet that you are giving to the people and teaching them. Ultimately, there is a biblical picture of God, and we’ve talked about this—the whitewater of God’s wrath and the extremes of God’s love. If we do not teach these books, if we do not study them, we are not going to see God in all of the rich and varied ways. So I want to encourage you: don’t be afraid of the prophets. They have a powerful, relevant, and practical message for us today, and I hope these introductory videos have given us a better orientation to what their message is about.

Editor: Annajoy Thompson; Scribes: Caven Bell, Hannah Sablan, Jessica Magaria, Stefan Anthos, and Alexander King
Edited and Titled by Amanda Colon
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt
Edited by Dr. Perry Phillips