

Allan MacRae, Ezekiel: Lecture 12

Many studying Scripture seriously go out and expound the Scriptures, and God uses them greatly with it. But those who have a fairly small amount of knowledge, or perhaps have a considerable amount but they haven't really thought through for themselves, they have simply taken from someone else and very frequently run dry after a time. They have been repeating over and over what they have already learned, and they don't have any knowledge or ability to go beyond that. If they do try to progress, they still don't have the requisite knowledge or ability to go much further. The person with a little knowledge, but yet grasps the great central truths of what the Scripture says and what says the Lord, is farther ahead. I do not mean to criticize anyone who lacks knowledge yet whom the Lord is using. But I do believe that the Lord desires that there should be those who can very carefully interpret his words and can know what are the basic things in it that are so clear that we have no questions about things on which we can stand solidly. They can discern what are the matters of which we have considerable knowledge from areas in which we may have to make guesses as we try to interrelate various scriptural pieces.

Then there are matters of which the Lord has given us hints, and has not developed those hints, and those hints sometimes in a certain situation, or a certain period of the world's history, exactly fit the situation and are tremendously helpful. At other times the hints are very hard to understand and we may wrongly interpret them, and thus we may get ideas that may be harmful or that make an unnecessary division from those who differ from us over matters on which the Scripture is not absolutely clear was what God wants us to believe. So I believe it is very important for the leadership of God's people that there be a certain number who have learned the Word and who can positively expand upon it, gradually working out a settled areas of truth and not thinking wildly.

I think everyone has made a great discovery at times. They made a guess and then tested the guess. So any kind of guess you want to make about anything

in Scripture, I think, is worth investigating. Often it may suggest something else. The primary point in my approach to Scripture is trying to see what is actually clear and certain and then stand on that. I then look at the possibilities of other interpretations so that we can, among these possibilities, find what best fits other scriptural teaching. We keep these possible interpretations in mind as we study different parts of Scripture, so when we are studying other parts, we may find support for one of our possible interpretations.

Now, last time we noticed that in the book of Ezekiel the prophet primarily devotes himself to the fact that God was going to punish the people. He was going to destroy the city of Jerusalem even though it ranked so high in the people's love and in their ideas. He was going to utterly destroy it because of the sin of the people, and He was going to send the rest of them into exile. The tone is generally one of rebuke, of pointing out the errors of those who do not follow the Lord. This was the first main section of Ezekiel.

Then we learned that the second main section would be during the siege, at which time we follow that the prophet did not say hardly anything about Israel, but he talks about the nations that had been attacking Israel, that had been injuring Israel, and he shows how God was going to punish those nations. This second section is of primary interest to us because there are a few places, just a few, where we can clearly see evidence of prediction in the message God gave us. God gave prophecy in certain specific statements that the prophet may not have fully understood. Certainly, Ezekiel might not know how a prophecy would come about, or the results that came from it, but he described the results in such a way that today we can focus on it like the prophecy on Tyre, and we can see that it was a prediction which was fulfilled in a way that Ezekiel could never have imagined it. He couldn't have possibly imagined how it would come about, and it came about centuries after his time. He had no basis to make a guess that this was what was actually going to happen, but we can see it today, the exact situation that God predicted. Now, there are many other prophecies that are more general that were

fulfilled, but a few were especially distinctive prophecies which I think are specific enough that you might say they are God's signature, like a unique signature on a check. These are signatures of the Lord, to show that there was a knowledge far beyond anything the prophet Ezekiel could have thought up in what would take place.

Then we notice that after the section on the exile, there is a change: we have very little criticism of the nation of Israel. Very little condemnation is directed at the people or their city. There is very little of this in the latter part of Ezekiel. We do find how he is going to punish the shepherd; he is going to remove the bad shepherds from the people. While that is not speaking of the nation as a whole in any sort of way, he does speak about the judgment between the blessed sheep and the oppressing sheep, and there again we are dealing with individuals. He is not criticizing the nation as a whole as he was doing in the earlier part.

In this latter part of the exile after the terrible prediction had actually come to pass, there had been a great slaughter, there has been the terrible exile away across the desert of the people, there has been the utter destruction of the city of Jerusalem. Now he gives them promises of hope that God would be true to them. He has great blessing for them and gives them wonderful promises and he gives them important glimpses of what is to happen in the future.

In these glimpses, the problem might be thought of as a man standing on a hill, standing on a high hill, and looking out and seeing all this area before him. In some places he can see how one feature comes right after another. In other places there may be a deep valley in between two heights, but there is no evidence of that valley as being there from the view point. Distant places though separated appear to be blending together, and it is not always easy to tell or always easy to know what is most distant from what is in the immediate distance. And so it is with prophecy. The prophet can give two predictions, one following the other but their fulfillment may be separated by a large time gap.

Getting back to what I said earlier, there are certain matters that stand out very clearly, and those matters that stand out clearly I think the Lord wants us to get our hands on to understand. You remember when the disciples were with the Lord Jesus Christ, they saw him working miracles, they heard his wonderful blessings, they heard his great teachings, but when Peter said, "You are the promised Messiah, the Son of God," Jesus said, "That has been revealed to you by my Father who is in Heaven." Then Peter was immediately blessed by Jesus, but went on to say how he would be taken and cruelly treated and killed, and Peter said, "Oh, no—that will never happen to you." Jesus did not praise him for this; he immediately rebuked him, and said, "Get behind me, Satan!" he said, "You're not doing the will of God but the will of man."

So there was so little real understanding of future things even when at least two or three times the Lord told them that he would suffer many beatings, and be killed, and on the third day he would rise from the dead. Yet when it happened, they were absolutely overwhelmed and they couldn't believe that he had risen from the dead.

When Jesus talked to the two men on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24, and they said, "We thought he could be the Christ," but they said, "now he's been killed." All contrary to their expectation, Jesus didn't say, "Well I went with you and I explained this to you on various times. Don't you remember? How many times do I have to say something to get it through your head?" That's not what he said at all. He said, "Fools and slow of heart to believe; all that the prophets said must be fulfilled--that Christ must have suffered and died." In other words, they should have studied the Scripture enough to gather from it these matters which are in the Old Testament.

So I think it's very important that we study future prophecy in Scripture; that we study prophecies very carefully in order to see in them what matters there are that are clear and that God wants us to stand upon; and what matters of different possibilities there are and what matters we just have to say that we do not

know what the prophets meant, but if we study them further, we are hopeful that we will find the answer to them.

I believe this is very important as an attitude in studying Scripture, but I don't think that this should be carried over into our preaching. There are times when it is good to give a message to show the general populace how to make progress in Bible study. But as a rule, we want to take what we know is certain and present that to them in a positive, definite way. It is a separate thing deciding what the truth is, deciding what the gradations are, and then speaking positively on the things we know, but not speaking so positively on the many matters on which there are various possibilities which we must leave up to interpretation.

Now we looked last time into the prophecies of Ezekiel 34 in which he looks back to things that, were immediate situations, and some that were in the more distant future. Today I asked you to look at chapter 36 and the last half of chapter 37. I asked you to find what was predicted and then to find other verses in which the same thing was predicted. So when we started the chapter, we found in verse 7 in chapter 36 that the Lord predicted judgment on the enemies of his people. "Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says, I swear with uplifted hands that the nations around you will fall and suffer soon." This is God's declaration of the way he would counter the evil in the world, but we do not have much of that here. Rather in verse 8 we have a prediction: "I am concerned with you and I will look on you with favor, you will be plowed and sown," talking to the mountains of Israel. This country remained desolate, absolutely uncared for as the people were taken into exile. This area is, again, to be plowed and sown. In other words, the land is going to produce fruit, bring forth good agriculture, good fruit for the people. Verse 8 says, "You, O mountains of Israel, will produce branches of fruit." In the next verse it says, "you will be plowed and sown." This is touched on again in verses 11, 12, 14, 15, 29, and 30. All of these emphasize the agricultural production that God is going to cause on the mountains of Israel.

Of course, you can just take this as a figure, and you can preach a beautiful

sermon on how God is going to bring forth the fruit of the mountains of Israel; how he is going to produce the bountiful harvests for those who have been born again in the Spirit of God. And you can draw it as an example for wonderful spiritual truths, but that is not what he's talking about here. There are many interpreters who whenever they find anything in Scripture's prediction that they do not feel can be literally fulfilled, they simply carry it over to be an example of some spiritual blessing. You call that "spiritualization." Spiritualization, in my opinion, is figurative language carried to an unjustified extreme. The Scripture has much figurative language in it, and we of course recognize it as figurative language. When it speaks of "the sheep," we know he is talking about the people under the figure of sheep. We have many literary figures in Scripture, and anybody who claims to take all the Bible literally is, of course, speaking utter nonsense. But there are figures of speech in Scripture as in every type of literature for that matter. I tend to think of figurative language like putting salt into a dish of food. A little salt sprinkled on—that is tasty and very beneficial. But if you take a whole pot of salt and put it on your food, you're going to ruin it. The so-called spiritualization doesn't make this verse mean anything at all. I believe that we should carefully avoid that. Of course, there is a distinction between that and simply taking something like a picture, or a character, as an example; there is nothing wrong with doing that, but we can do that without undermining the sense of the text. I believe it's important that we ask ourselves: Is this intended for me as figurative, or is this meant to be taken literally?

Now, it is true that God's people will bring forth fruit. They will bring forth fruit unto eternal life and accomplish much for him, but these predictions in these chapters seem to me to be a prediction of the literal fruits in the actual land of Israel. That's how Ezekiel meant it, and that's how the people of that day would have understood it.

Israel today has made tremendous agricultural progress, but I do not think that it is sufficient to fulfill this prediction about the land of Israel. In fact I even

heard a joke made. It was said Moses did a very strange thing—he led his people into the only place in the Near East where there wasn't oil. Quite a slam on Moses of course. So the Lord made a definite prediction of great fruit in Israel, and I believe that it is worldly prosperity, rather than spiritual fruitfulness, that is in mind here.

In chapter 36, verse 8, we read "But you, mountains of Israel, will produce branches of fruit for my people Israel, for they will soon come home." Now, what does "soon" mean? "Soon" certainly doesn't mean ten thousand years. Only about 35 to 40 years after Ezekiel, God brought Cyrus the Persian in to conquer the Babylonians and to free the Israelites to return to Israel. Surely this is a specific prediction of that occurrence that was fulfilled at that time.

In verse 24 it says, "For I will take you out of the nations, I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land." Surely that is a prediction of the regathering of Israel. Was that completely fulfilled when they came back in the time of Ezra, or does it look further to other returns to the land of Israel? At any rate, it seems to me that we have to take it as the physical return of the people to Israel. We can look at it as an illustration of those who have wandered from God's paths and then return to him, but we should remember when we do that we are spiritualizing.

In verse 28 Ezekiel says, "You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people and I will be your God." In chapter 37, in verse 14, he says, "I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will place you in your own land." In verse 21 he says, "This is what the sovereign Lord says, 'I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone; I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land.'" When they speak of "all" the nations, that seems to go beyond the Babylonian captivity. In the Babylonian captivity, the bulk of the Jews were taken off into the land of Babylon, but some fled and into Egypt. But this term "all" the land seems to look beyond that. It certainly includes Babylon and Egypt, but does it not include more?

I believe, under this category, verse 25, "They will live in the land I gave to my servant Jacob, the land where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children's children will live there forever and David my servant will be their leader forever." That certainly was not fulfilled at the time of their return from exile. They returned and they lived there for a long time; they certainly did not have David, or anyone who could be thought of as being represented figuratively by David as their leader during that post-exilic period. Eventually, they were once again driven out and scattered over the world.

It seems to me we cannot escape that we have here a specific, definite prediction about an earthly people that is going to be brought back to this land and is going to enjoy great prosperity in it. Has that prediction yet been fulfilled? Well, it hardly seems that it has gone far enough to consider this prophecy to have been fulfilled up to this time.

Now we find in verse ten, there in chapter 36, that God will multiply his people. That is in verse eleven, in verse thirty-nine and forty, and in verse 26 of the next chapter: "I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them, now and forever." The next thing that we notice as we go through chapter 36 is that God will rebuild the ruins. In verse 3--I had a little question there about verse 3--this is what the Lord says, "Because they ravaged and hounded you from every side so that you became the possession of the rest of the nations, and the object of peoples' malicious talk and slander." Verse 10 says, in fact the last half of 10, "The towns will be inhabited and the ruins rebuilt." And this promise is repeated in the next verse, and in verses 33, 34, and 35, but it is not so much in this entire passage, just in these three verses.

Then, in verse 23 you find that God is going to show the holiness of his name. This is a very important theme in verses 1, 31, 36, and 38 in this chapter, and in verses 13, 14, and 28 of chapter 37. Let's just look at the last of these in 37:28: "Then the nations will know that I, the Lord, make Israel holy, when my

sanctuary is among them forever." And he will show the holiness of his name. But it cannot be said that this was shown to any great extent after the return from the exile. It is true that in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah God worked in people, and many had pride, and did follow the Lord very truly, but there were many who didn't during that period.

In the present time, within these last 40 years after becoming a nation, many people 80 years ago could never imagine the restoration the land of Israel as a nation, so many consider it a great fulfillment of God's promise in the establishment of the nation of Israel. What we must say though, is that this has certainly not been a complete fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy. Maybe the Israelites have gone back there in order to escape persecution, in order to escape bad conditions in the other lands, but the nation is very definitely a secular nation. There is a rather small group of fanatical Orthodox Jews; orthodox in the sense not of putting great stress on Scripture, but of great stress on the Talmud, and the very traditional approach that Christ objected to. The great mass of the people of Israel today however, are quite uninterested in the things of God. And so these predictions cannot be said to have been fulfilled in the nation of Israel. We see this is true, verse 25 in chapter 35, when he says, "They will be cleansed from their impurity." He points that out in verses 25, 49, and 33 in chapter 36, too.

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