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Ponderings from the Prophets

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Hebrews 1:1-4 (ESV)

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Matthew 23:37-38

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you desolate.

To keep the kings on track, God sends them prophets. Prophets. And that is what we are looking at today.

I want to highlight some points to ponder from the prophets. Now, I don't know who said it, but Romans 15:4 says to us, "Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through what we learn there, you and I might live with hope in our present day and encouragement and perseverance in our present day."

I don't know who penned this, but it has been said. Now, some people say George Santayana, some people say Winston Churchill, some people say Edmund Burke, but this phrase is very well known: "Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it."

The Bible says God recorded this history for us so that we could learn from it. It is aptly said that if we don't learn from it, we'll just be in this vicious cycle—a vicious cycle that humanity goes in.

The first five books of the Old Testament are the law: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Then the historical books—the history of what happened. Then those wisdom books, right in the middle. And then you have 17 books at the end, which are known as the prophets.

Now, there are four major prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. They're called the major prophets simply because they have more writing in the Scripture; they're longer books. So, you have the four major prophets, the 12 minor prophets in the Scriptures, and then you have one other book in this genre.

It's called *Lamentations*, and it is the emotional life, basically, of the prophet Jeremiah. So, there you have a little overview of where we're at in context in the Scripture, and again, an overview of the Bible.

What I want to do today is make a few points about the prophet, the points for us to consider, and then a couple of pastoral encouragements out of that.

According to biblical history, a prophet is a person who is called by God to speak the Word of God or the revelation of God in a specific time in history to certain people. The New Testament says Jesus appoints people to be prophets.

He gave some—Ephesians 4. He gives some to be apostles, others to be prophets, others to be evangelists, and still others to be pastors and teachers. For this purpose: for the encouraging of his people in the world. God wants to encourage us, so he assigns different gifts to different people to build us up and strengthen us in our life.

He gave some to be evangelists. Evangelists are actually to reach outside of the family of God, share the good news of God, and invite others into the Kingdom of God—to be evangelistic, to be sharing of the good news.

He gave others to be prophets—those who speak a word of God or the Word of God. To others, it's more prophetic. It's more proclamation of the Word of God.

Then you have teaching and pastoring, which is sort of helping people understand the Word of God. So, he gave some to be prophets.

How did he call these prophets? We see the calling of Isaiah in a different way than we do Jeremiah, in a different way than we do Malachi. But each one is appointed differently, in a different time.

Isaiah's calling is like this. He writes about it in his book:

"The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem—this is the southern portion of the divided kingdom—that Isaiah, son of Amoz, saw. So God gave Isaiah a vision that he was supposed to go and share with the people.

The vision that God gave Isaiah occurred during the reigns of King Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, the kings of Judah. 'Hear me, you heavens! Listen, earth, for the Lord has spoken. I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its master, the donkey its own manger, but Israel does not know. My people do not understand.' They lost their way with having God be their Lord."

The calling of the prophet Jeremiah is a little bit different:

"Now the word of the Lord came to me," Jeremiah writes, saying, "'Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. Before you were born, I consecrated you. I appointed you as a prophet to the nations to speak my message to the nations.'

Then I said, 'Ah, Lord! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.' But the Lord said to me, 'Do not say, "I am only a youth," for to all whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you,' declares the Lord."

Later in his life, this man who said that he couldn't speak said, "The Word of God burns so deeply within me. It's like a fire within my belly or a fire within my bones. I can no longer hold it in." God stirred him to become one of his prophets.

So, we see a prophet as a person who has a calling to speak a message or a revelation from God to others. We also see in the Scriptures that there have been many prophets raised up and sent by God to many different people at many different times in history. God is frequently doing this.

Hebrews 1:1 starts this way: "Long ago, at many times, in many ways, God spoke to our forefathers by the prophets." He is very often raising up people to be his voice, his ambassadors, his messengers in the world, to share his word with people.

We also see that being a prophet—or a person sent from God who is faithful to God's message—is not often correlated with winning many popularity contests.

When you are a prophet in this world, you're receiving a message from outside of the world that very often the world doesn't like to receive and doesn't receive well.

So there are different reactions to you. I've had just a little taste of this. When I am traveling and I get to know someone, they eventually ask me what I do. It's always an interesting dynamic to share that I am a pastor, because this whole idea of being a pastor stirs up different feelings in different people's minds.

Usually, one of two things happens. Number one, the conversation ends pretty quickly after a few comments about apologies for curses that they've made already in our conversation, or apologies or some claiming about the goodness of their life. Then the conversation quiets down a little bit.

Or, we get some sort of spiritual conversation going that becomes, sometimes, just a little hyper-religious. So I have this dynamic, and I have a sense of this, but nothing like the prophets of old. And nothing like many who have been messengers by God in more hostile times.

The prophets and those who speak God's Word—many of them were killed. Many of them tried to be silenced. Many of them were physically abused in certain ways from the message that God gave them.

We shouldn't be surprised at this because Paul wrote to young Timothy and said, "Everyone who wants to live a godly life will be persecuted in some way." And Jesus said, "If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you."

Prophets are speakers of a message from God to a group of people in the world. There have been many of them down through history. As a matter of fact, the Bible records over 133 named prophets, 12 of which were women.

There's also a time when 70 elders prophesied. And, of course, there's reference to the prophecy of Abel all the way to Zechariah, and John the Baptist being the last prophet in the Scriptures—the last Old Testament prophet in the Scriptures.

So you have this whole second half of the Old Testament. I just want to give you some things to think about, points to ponder around the prophets, and then some pastoral encouragements.

Number one: out of great love for us. Out of great love for us, you understand the heart of God. He loves us with an everlasting love. In all of human history, God is interested in getting his message to us, his word to us.

Certainly, Jerusalem killed the prophets, stoned the prophets. But God, in His love, generation after generation after generation, stirs people and infuses them and brings them to life in His word, to bring His word to us. It's such a gift from God.

In His great love, He raised up the prophets, sent them into city after city, nation after nation, to address king after king, because He loved those people. He cared deeply for them. And so He would stir in the hearts of people to go send His message of love to them.

But sometimes, His love came with some strong intensity—a tough kind of love, a speaking-the-truth kind of love. People didn't like it, but it still remains. This is God's great love for us and why He wants to continue to send His word to us through people.

Secondly, we can ponder the idea that, because God did this in His great love, He's more interested in we as human beings coming to Him and finding life in Him and finding purpose and fullness in Him than He is in our own personal comforts.

There is no question that God disrupts people's lives. He sends individuals into groups of people to disrupt them, to wake them, to shake them, to bring them out of their complacency, to bring them out of their idolatries, to bring them out of their comforts.

Prophet after prophet after prophet in the Old Testament came, and they were told, as Jeremiah was, not to fear the people, but to fear God more than them. God knew they were going to experience resistance—to stir up people and disrupt their status quo and their way of life, which was displeasing to God.

But this is all done in love. This is the love of God stirring in the hearts of people, trying to shake us free from our complacency and our casual, idolatrous comforts so that we could find the fullness of life in Him and find what is best in Him.

It's chapter after chapter after chapter in the second half of the Old Testament.

And thirdly, we can just simply ponder that we as humans don't always like to hear what God has to say. We just don't.

The New Testament says it this way: as time goes on, people will gather to themselves preachers and teachers who will simply say to them what their itching ears want to hear. They will tell them what they

want to hear. They won't tell them what God has said. They'll just simply tell them what they want to hear.

And, of course, that's why many people in human history rejected the prophets.

Out of great love for us, God is interested in communicating with us—His word, His ways, His holiness, His righteousness—so that we might not get caught in the traps of this world, the enslavement of the pleasures of this world, but find true life in Him.

But we often don't want to hear it, and we would rather hear things that just make us feel good about ourselves. We can learn all this from the entire second half of the Old Testament.

So I want to just give you now some pastoral encouragements around the prophets.

The first one is this: Jesus talked about different kinds of soil in the human heart. He said there is some seed—the seed of God's Word. It's scattered, it goes forth, and there is some kind of soil that's hard and just rejects it. There's some kind of soil that's crowded and doesn't have room for it. There's other soil that's sort of receptive of it. It springs up, but it's like sandy soil, and it doesn't last.

But then there's good soil—good, soft, nourishing soil. And then he said, this is how the Word of God goes forth. Some people reject it. Others receive it and then get rid of it. Still others don't have time for it. But there are some. There are some who hear it and receive it, and fruit grows, and it starts to multiply—hundredfold, thousandfold.

And when we consider the Old Testament, I don't think it's a stretch just to encourage us in our day, where the Holy Spirit is more present. The moment a person believes, now under the New Covenant, the Holy Spirit is in their heart. And God has said through His Spirit, He will give us a new heart—a soft heart, not a heart of stone, but a heart of flesh that can receive God's Word.

And so, if you don't have a soft heart and you're not open to whatever God might say, could I encourage you, as a pastor, to ask God to help you get a soft heart before Him?

I don't know what your past has been. I don't know your history or what kind of church experience you've had. But in the end, God only looks at our heart. And don't hold against God what you may have experienced negatively in a church.

He still wants to speak to you. And if you will soften your heart before Him, He will start to move there and work there and minister to you. He's done it all through history, and He's still doing it today.

Let's pray together, shall we?

Father, thank you for your Word, which you have given us, and it teaches us so much about life. It teaches us about your nature. And we have the whole Old Testament that you gave us to record your work in history from the genesis of all things forward.

We see the rebellion of human nature, but we see your patience, your grace, your kindness, your mercy, your love for us in coming to us again and again and again. With each new generation, you seek us out and call us to yourself.

I sense that you're probably speaking to us about the condition of our hearts—maybe our rebellions against you, our openness to whatever you would say to us.

Father, we sit here at this point in human history as your people, and we do want to hear from you. We want to be stirred by you and strengthened by you to live for your eternal kingdom, that we might bear fruit in our time here on the earth before you call us home.

So continue to draw us to yourself and help us have hearts that are open to you and devoted to you.

Thank you.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.