

Major Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel

Major Prophets: The phenomenon of Old Testament prophecy may seem extraordinary to modern man, especially considering similar experiences recorded among pagan cultures throughout the ancient near east. However, the role of the prophet among the people of God is truly unique in comparison to the distinctive message delivered as well as the willingness of the prophet himself to suffer harsh punishment and even death because of his proclamation. The word of the prophet was no mere exercise in religious experience, it was the quintessential scenario of a covenant God addressing his people living in a manner that does not reflect their calling. Even so, the mission of God is clarified and explicated in an unprecedented way in the period of the prophets.

The objective of this class is to explore the depth of the sin of the OT people of God as well as the great grace of God as he continues his redemptive plan throughout history. We will explore the world and message of the Major Prophets seeking to answer the question, what was the message of the prophets to the OT people of God, and what is their message for the people of God today

Introduction: Last week we explored the first twelve chapters of the book of Isaiah. We discussed the context in which Isaiah conducted his ministry as well as the scope of this ministry. The twelve chapters previously covered can be collectively summarized as the King chapters: we are informed of the true king of Israel in the call and commission of the prophet: YAHWEH. We are instructed in the weakness of the earthly king of Israel, though a descendant in the Davidic dynasty, and the King who is to come (Christ) was foretold offering us a glimpse into the kingdom of this King and the redemptive work of his dominion. The motif of the king being the first major theme of this prophetic book, this week we will explore the second major theme: the global intent of God's work of salvation. This is not a new theme; indeed, it has been part of the very core of the covenants made with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David and can aptly be defined as the cosmic work of redemption. For this purpose, we have labeled this section, *God's Global Message*.

Part One: Judgment on Babylon – The kingdom of Babylon would not rise to the level of presenting a threat to ancient Judah until the sixth century B.C. Recalling that Isaiah's ministry occurred in the eighth century B.C., we can determine from the prophecy regarding the impending judgment on Babylon that the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah previously referenced in chapters 4 and 5 is here more explicitly stated to be the cause of the Babylonian empire.

We have mentioned before that the only true judge is YAHWEH and he has given all judgment to the Son (John 5:22). Christ is the only man, king or empire that has ever lived or that ever will live that can judge without also bringing judgment down on himself by the same measure. He is the only perfect man, the only perfect king. He is the God-man. This is not to say that God does not use secondary causes to accomplish his will, as stated so clearly by the Westminster Confession, "Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the First Cause, all things come to pass immutably, and infallibly; yet, by the same providence, he ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently."¹ God uses the armies of foreign kings quite often throughout scripture to judge his people (the book of Judges is full of such examples); however, the same kingdoms are likewise judged for both their own sins as well as the iniquity incurred by oppressing the people of God. In other words, even the deeds of the ungodly are sovereignly orchestrated by God to accomplish his will, yet such employment of providence does not absolve the sinners of the culpability of their

¹ WCF Chapter 5 Part 2.

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actions nor does it expunge the guilt incurred thereby. As the WCF continues to state, “God, in his ordinary providence, makes use of means, yet is he free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure.”²

The prophet Isaiah references the Day of the Lord, a common expression used throughout the prophets to denote the time of God’s judgment on the nations. He states, “Behold, the day of the Lord comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it” (13:9). Against the executor of the judgement of God, will God’s judgment be executed. Reference is made to the commissioning of another executor of God’s judgment against Babylon, “... *I myself have commanded my consecrated ones, (Medes and Persian), and have summoned my mighty men to execute my anger, my proudly exulting ones*” (13:3). Are we to understand the Medes and Persians are consecrated in the same manner as were the covenant people of God? Not at all. Rather, we are to see the word consecrated ones (or *שְׁדֵי* in Hebrew, the same word translated “holy” in other places), as simply “set apart”. The Medes and Persians were set apart or raised to power for the sake of bringing glory to God. They glorified God by being the means of God’s just judgment against Babylon.

The prophet himself explains in the first few verses of chapter 14 the result of this judgement, “*For the Lord will have compassion on Jacob and will again choose Israel, and will set them in their own land, and sojourners will join them and will attach themselves to the house of Jacob.*” This message is assurance for the people of God, that judgement will come and redemption will follow. However, this is not the last word to Babylon. In chapter 21, we see that whereas God previously judged Babylon for the destruction of the people of God, he will also judge them for their idolatry, “*Fallen, fallen, is Babylon; and all the carved images of her gods he (God) has shattered to the ground*” (21:9). Thus, the day of the Lord will bring judgement on the people of God for their sins, the people of the earth for the ungodliness, but ultimately, the full confirmation of a kingdom in which, “... *they shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth, shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.*” This is because all judgement will be given to the Son (the true King of the earthly lineage of David), who will, “...*not judge by what his eyes see or judge disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth*” (11:3-4a).

Part Two: Judgement & Refuge – Chapter 14 verse 24 through chapter 19 verse 15 describe a series of oracles that offer assurance to the people of God that he will avenge his covenant community of foreign oppressors. He states, “*The Lord of hosts has sworn: ‘As I have planned, so shall it be, and as I have purposed so shall it stand, that I will break the Assyrian in my land, and on my mountains, trample him underfoot... this is the purpose that is purposed concerning the whole earth, and this is the hand that is stretched out over all nations...’*” As Motyer states, “The Assyrian incident is the model for the eschaton.”³ Assyria and their destruction of Israel as well as the decline of the Assyrian kingdom shortly thereafter, is assurance to the people of God of the veracity of his promises.

The next oracle is delivered to Philistia, the ancient kingdom of the Philistines, that play such a significant role in the story of King David. Since Isaiah declared this oracle in the year of King Ahaz’s death (14:28), it is likely that this is a reference to the Davidic dynasty. Motyer points out that the Davidic dynasty arguably was broken and never independent after the reign of Ahaz since the kings that followed were subjugated to a series of external loyalties. Whether this is a reference to the Davidic

² WCF Chapter 5 Part 3.

³ Motyer, Alec J. *The Prophecy of Isaiah*. Pg. 146.

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dynasty or to the Assyrian kingdom's inability to exert their dominion over the Philistines (they purportedly had developed an Anti-Assyrian alliance with Egypt), the truth remains that Philistia had no reason to rejoice. They too, will drink from the cup of God's wrath.⁴ Protection and redemption here are promised on behalf of the covenant people of God, not because of a qualitative superiority but, *"The Lord has founded Zion, and in her, the afflicted of his people find refuge."* Zion was a reminder to the people of God of the Davidic covenant, and God's promise to have a man of the lineage of David always on the throne before him.

Moab follows, with the proclamation, *"... Moab is laid waste in the night"* (15:1). Motyer correctly summarizes these first three oracles by stating the following: "The Babylon oracle revealed that world history, even in its most threatening and climactic forms, is so organized that the people of God are cared for. The Philistia oracle confirmed this by insisting that the Davidic promises would be kept, and the Moab oracle corrects any impression that the hope expressed in the Davidic promises is exclusivist. Isaiah now says that the promises which will be fulfilled for David in Zion are for all who will take refuge there."⁵ The Moabite oracle states, *"... let the outcasts of Moab sojourn among you (Zion); be a shelter to them from the destroyer. When the oppressor is no more and destruction has ceased, and he who tramples underfoot has vanished from the land, then a throne will be established in steadfast love, and on it will sit in faithfulness in the tent of David one who judges and seeks justice and is swift to do righteousness"* (16:4-5). There is no reason to believe that such refuge is only to be extended to Moab. In fact, both Egypt and Assyria are mentioned in chapter 20.

At least four other oracles are given after this one to Moab, one to Damascus, Ephraim, Cush and Egypt all describing similar phenomenon: judgement for ungodliness and safety in Mount Zion. Zion takes on a new meaning, one that is earlier defined as follows, *"It shall come to pass in the latter days, that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many people shall come and say: 'Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.' For out of Zion shall go the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem"* (2:2-3). Note that this text states that all nations shall flow into the mountain of the house of the Lord.

Part Three: Salvation Among the Nations – The global reach of salvation pursuant to the covenant of God is further evidenced by the promise of salvation extended to Egypt and Assyria. When one recalls that the Moabite was not allowed admittance into the congregation of the Lord until the tenth generation, and no Egyptian was allowed admittance until the third generation (Deuteronomy 23:3 and 8 respectively), it seems remarkable that the blessing that here grants admittance into the covenant people of God must be far greater than the curse accompanying the initial exodus from Egypt. Indeed, the nature of this blessing is such that it is greater than the curse to which the world was subjected at the time of the fall of man (11:1-9).

In the day of the Lord, we have the following promise, *"In that day, there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border. It will be a sign and a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt. When they cry to the Lord because of oppressors, he will send them a savior, and defender and deliver them. And the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians, and the*

⁴ Motyer, Alec J. *The Prophecy of Isaiah*. Pg. 149.

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Egyptians will know the Lord in that day and worship with sacrifice and offering, and they will make vows to the Lord and perform them. And the Lord will strike Egypt, striking and healing, and they will return to the Lord, and he will listen to their pleas for mercy and heal them. In that day, there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and Assyria will come into Egypt, and Egypt into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. In that day, Israel, will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt, my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance' (19:19-25). The ministry of both Isaiah and Jeremiah does much to awaken the people of God to the realization that the mission of God is bigger than the boundaries of the land of Canaan, and the people of God will include Jew and gentile alike when the full fruition of God's redemptive plan becomes a reality.

It is easy for the western church living at the dawn of the twenty-first century, to look judgmentally upon the OT people of God and quickly condemn them for being ethnocentric. Their failure to grasp what God is doing in the earth, arguably limited their ability to be a light to the nations. However, the NT church must ask this question with each new generation: in what ways are we limiting the redemptive work of God in the world? Ethnocentrism is a human problem, and is just as prevalent within cultures and sub-cultures of today as it was in ancient times, perhaps more so. Furthermore, there are other cultural and geographical barriers that contribute to the people of God concluding that one's specific church is superior to another with less resources, or in another part of the world. Such barriers are unbiblical, and counter-productive to the advancement of God's kingdom.

God's mission is and always has been a global mission. From the Creation Mandate (preceding the fall), of being fruitful and filling the earth, to the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 12:3) to the specific purpose stated in the redemption of Israel from Egypt, to the characterization of the kingdom of God in the land of the covenant, the redemptive agenda of God has been global. One might ask, then why are the geographical boundaries of the land of promise defined? The geographical boundaries of the land of ancient Israel were meant to be a theater from which the dominion of God could be displayed and demonstrated to the entire world. Exile from the land, was a consequence of the failure of God's people to live up to this missional standard.

Part Four: The Final Judgement – The nations of the earth are judged, and this judgement, capable of being witnessed by the people of God, should assure humanity of the certainty of the final eschaton. This story of prophecy confronts all aspects of redemptive history: creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. God's people are given insight from the final pages of the divine play book. The decline and subjugation of the Davidic dynasty may appear to be the catastrophic indicator that God has broken covenant and has changed his mind regarding an eternal kingship on the throne of David, then the true king (6:1) is revealed and the King of Kings (9:6) will reign eternally. The title of Zion is ascribed to his royal seat, and to him will be entrusted the final judgement.

Isaiah 24:21-23 reveals, *"On that day the Lord will punish the host of heaven, in heaven, and the kings of the earth, on the earth. They will be gathered together as prisoners in a pit; they will be shut up in a prison, and after many days they will be punished. Then the moon will be confounded, and the sun ashamed, for the Lord of hosts reigns on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and his glory will be before the elders."* Judgement will be universal, and redemption will be complete at dusk on the day of the Lord.

This term, *Day of the Lord*, occupies a significant place in prophetic literature. Since Amos probably preceded Isaiah in his ministry (see Frank Sanders, page 7), he seems to have been the first to have used

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the phrase (Amos 5:18). Whether the phrase pre-dated Amos and was used to describe some other impending event is uncertain. What is certain is the similarity between characteristics describing the Day of the Lord. According to Amos, Isaiah, Joel, and Acts, the characteristics of the Day are as follows: 1) judgement – on the ungodly. 2) natural phenomenon such as the darkening of the sun and interstellar disruptions. 3) Exaltation of God and Christ; 4) victory of the church; 5) completion of God's redemptive plan.⁶ To think of the day as a literal twenty-four-hour period is a misnomer since it is intended to describe more of an era or even phenomenon occurring in ancient times, which indicate God's redemptive acts in space and time.

In the New Testament, Peter ascribes the events of the Day of Pentecost to be indicative of the presence of the Day of the Lord. Quoting Joel, he states, "*This (the outpouring of the presence of God) is what is uttered through the prophet Joel...*" (Acts 2:16). Then, Peter proceeds to quote Joel 2:31-32 referencing the description of the Day of the Lord alluded to above. More than being final judgement, and it is, the Day of the Lord is also redemption complete.

Conclusion: Central to the ministry of Isaiah, is the promise of a coming King. A King who is revealed from many different vantage points. This King is contrasted with the earthly representative of the Davidic dynasty, he is described as presiding over a completely transformed (redeemed) creation. He is described later as the suffering servant. All vantage points reveal aspects of the true King's humiliation as well as exaltation.

The other central theme of the book is the global reach of God's kingdom. Nowhere is this vision more apparent than in the text explored today. As believers living in the new millennium, we should make every effort to understand and participate in God's global mission. One practical way that we can do this is by supporting both the local and foreign mission efforts of our church. Support might look like prayer, monetary giving and/or participation on site in a foreign mission trip. Regardless, of whether we travel abroad, God's world mission first and foremost makes demands of us for where we are (our own back yard). We are all missionaries. May God change our hearts and keep ever before us the mission of making disciples of all men in every corner of our globe!

⁶ Sanders, Frank Knight. *Old Testament Prophecy*. Pg. 7