

The Old Testament Prophets  
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March 07, 2010

If you open your Bible to the table of contents, and you look under the section called Old Testament, referring to those books written before the coming of Christ, you'll notice that the last third of those books are a collection of names, strange names. They kinda come one after another beginning with Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, working all the way down 'til you come to the name Malachi. Those names are prophets, ancient prophets of Israel, prophets who primarily wrote during a time frame of about four hundred years from about 800 BC to about 400 BC. It was the darkest time in Israel's history. Israel was collapsing into disarray. They were going to be defeated by first the Assyrians and the Babylonians; then they were carried off into exile and they lived out of their land. And it was a difficult, dark time in Israel's history. And these prophets wrote during that time. They spoke to the nation about what had happened in the past, what was going on in that present situation, and then they gave statements about what would yet happen far off into the future.

They're kind of strange and fascinating books when you begin to read 'em. They kind of reflect the names...strange and fascinating. You get into it and there's parables, and there's visions, and riddles, and there's interpretations, and there's all sorts of things that you read through. And it doesn't read like normal writing. And some people get despairing when they read that, and they don't like the strange names, and they don't like the strange flow of things. And yet there's something fascinating about it. Well, for the Christian it's more than fascinating. We are called by God to pay close attention to those books, to those writings. In fact, as Christians we are told that we should pay attention to those writings as if they're a light shining in a very dark place.

My goal today is to underscore why we should do that, and I wanna try to do that fairly quickly and efficiently. And after that not only talk about why we should do it; I want to spend a good portion of our time talking about how to do that on a very practical level, because this is strange literature. And I wanna make sure by the time we're done today you know how it is you can pick it up and pay attention to it as if it's a light shining in a very dark place. That's our goal today.

We're gonna start with a passage of Scripture that will underscore both why we should be doin' it and give us a command to do that, to pay attention to it. It's found in the book of 2 Peter. I'm gonna encourage you to turn there. And it's 2 Peter 1, and I'm gonna read through this section just so you hear it read, and you hear the Apostle Peter as he speaks to us, God's people, and you'll understand as I read, as we go through this, why it is then that we should pay such close attention to these prophets of old and how then we'll be ready to go on and say, 'ok, how are we going to do that.' So this is gonna lay the base as to why. Ok?

The Apostle Peter, 2 Peter 1; we're gonna start the reading at verse 16. Peter is near his death. It's almost thirty years since he had walked with Jesus through Galilee and seen Jesus crucified, buried, and rose again from the dead. It's been a long time for Peter, and Peter knows that he's gonna die soon. And he's concerned that when he dies his message will still be heard, that the gospel would still be listened to. And so, as he introduces this material, he says to his audience in verse 15, he says, 'I'm gonna make sure that you're able to recall my teaching. I'm gonna make sure that you will be able to go back and review what I've taught you, and what the other apostles have taught you.' And then he goes on and says this is why he's so concerned they will continue to have his message when he's gone. He says, "For we," speaking of he and the other apostles,

*...did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our LORD Jesus Christ,"*

And he's speaking here of the power and the coming of Jesus at His return. He says 'When we talked about that we did not follow cleverly devised myths, or stories, or tales...'

*"...but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to Him by the Majestic Glory, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,"*

Peter says, verse 18,

*"...we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with Him on the holy mountain. And we have something more sure, the prophetic word,"*

...those Scriptures of the Old Testament prophets...

*"...to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts,"*

...a reference to Jesus' return when we will see not only His glory, but our hearts themselves will grip it; not just physical sight, but our souls. He says 'You do well to pay attention to it knowing...' verse 20,

*"...this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."*

The thought flow is fairly straightforward. Peter's defending or urging them to pay attention to his teaching, and he is committed to preserving it because, he says, 'We didn't follow cleverly devised stories. Our message, the gospel message, has a firmer base than that.' And the first part of the base, or the biblical or the gospel story, he says, is 'we were eyewitnesses of His majesty.' In other words, he's speaking of that time when he, Peter, and James and then John all saw Jesus transfigured in front of them in a special moment on the mountain...when all of a sudden they got a glimpse of Jesus in His glory as King over all. He says, 'We saw that. And so our message, when we talk about Jesus in His majesty and His glory, is based on something we've had an eyewitness experience. So I wanna make sure you keep our teaching,' he says. 'This isn't just a story.'

And then he adds a second reason why he wants to preserve his message of Jesus. He goes on and says, 'And we have the prophetic word.' And what he's getting at here is 'not only do we have our personal eyewitness experience as apostles'; he says 'we also have the prophetic word', those writings of the Old Testament Scriptures. That's specifically what he's referring to here. And when he mentions those prophetic writings he makes two statements with respect to them that are astounding. The first one is a phrase that I deleted here, but I'm gonna put it back into the statement. And it's translated in a couple different ways in various translations, but the best, I believe, literal way to read this statement is he says, 'and we have something more sure, something more sure than our eyewitness testimony.' He says, 'We have something more sure, more definite, more reliable, than what we came down and told you from the mountain. We have the prophetic word. The words of those apostles...those prophets...spoken so long ago. When we talk about the coming of Jesus and His glory and His wonder and His majesty, it isn't just a myth. We've got a glimpse of it, and we've got the prophetic word with respect to it.'

You see, Peter and the apostles had a very high view of the prophetic word, those Old Testament Scriptures—how reliable, how sure those writings were. When those prophets wrote so long ago, as Israel was collapsing into the darkness, when they wrote and they spoke about the future, Peter says their word was sure. Let me give you an example of why they had come to appreciate how firm, how sure, how reliable those Old Testament prophecies were. Isaiah, one of those prophets, wrote about seven hundred years before Christ. Israel was already on its downhill slide, and he began to prophecy. And as he looked to the future he began to speak of things, and began to speak of the fact that yes, 'Israel is going to collapse. We're not going to come out of this. In fact, we are gonna hit the bottom. We are gonna be destroyed. We're gonna be defeated by the Assyrians; we're gonna be defeated by the Babylonians; and we are gonna be sent out to exile. We are gonna cease to exist as a nation.' Isaiah saw all that and he spoke of it in his prophecies.

And then at one point in his prophetic writings, in chapter 44 through 46 of the book of Isaiah, the prophet begins to talk about something else. As he looks to the future and he sees the darkness ahead he begins to talk; and he says, 'You know, there's gonna be a time when a leader arises. And he's gonna arise from the east, and he's gonna defeat the Babylonians. And then he's gonna do an amazing thing...he's gonna gather all the scattered people of God, of Israel, and he's gonna send them back to the land. And he's gonna give us back our home.' And he says, 'The name of this king is Cyrus.' A hundred and sixty years later...a hundred and sixty years later Israel had been defeated by the Assyrians, they had been defeated by the Babylonians, they had been sent out to exile, their homeland was desolate, and they were living an exile existence. They were living in refugee camps, scattered across the middle east. A hundred and sixty years later, among the Medes and the Persians, there arose a leader, a powerful genius of a man. He rallied the Medes and Persians together, and he led them. And they became a conquering force. In fact, they defeated the Babylonians. And they, the Medes and the Persians, became the

powerhouse on the international scene at that time. And once he established himself in power he sent the Jews back to their homeland. And he gave them treasure and fortune to help rebuild their temple and their city. And his name was Cyrus. A hundred and sixty years before, Isaiah not only described him, he named him.

That prophecy is so spot-on accurate that critics look at Isaiah and say, 'This can not be. This is impossible. This could never be done.' And so they argue that what happened is somebody wrote that prophecy, that passage of Scripture, those three chapters, *after* Isaiah and *after* Cyrus, and then put Isaiah's name on it...kinda like a post-dated check. In fact, critics have looked at other parts of Isaiah and said 'There's other passages like this. There's no way that this could happen over and over again.' And so they've decided that Isaiah was probably written by three different guys at different time periods, because that's the only way you could account for such accurate prophecy. I don't find their arguments convincing, especially when I see what Jesus...and read what Jesus said about Isaiah. He was a prophet, and he was spot-on accurate.

Now, he goes on and explains why it is that we can see...why it is that a prophet like that could look a hundred and sixty years into the future and name the king that's gonna arise—not only describe him and what he's gonna do, but name him. And Peter goes on and explains why that can be, because the prophetic word is not human teaching. It's not human prediction. He goes on in this passage and says, 'In the prophetic word it is not men coming up with their interpretation of events, and time, and projecting into the future, just because they want to.' He says, 'Prophetic Scripture is never originated in men, and come about by their will.' He says, 'In prophetic Scripture it is men speak from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.' Picture a sailboat, and the wind comes up and fills the sails and carries it forward. He says, 'That's what it's like with prophecy. God's Spirit comes along, fills the prophet, and enables him to speak of the future with spot-on accuracy, a hundred and sixty years before the event, naming what will happen and the person who will do it.'

Look at that and it makes sense that we would be told to pay attention to that writing, and to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place. But how do we do that? How do we pick up this strange section of the Bible with the strange names and the strange visions, and really get a grip on it? Generally when I tell people to pay attention to the Scriptures, to spend time in it, I just encourage them "Pick it up and read. Start reading." I'm not worried that we become studied scholars. We just need to be good readers in Scripture. And so generally I just tell people, "You wanna know about Jesus? Pick up the gospels and start reading. You wanna know the Old Testament story? Pick up Genesis and just start in reading." But when it comes to the prophets it's more of a challenge.

For one, you're reading literature that was written very much in ancient times, like the rest of the Bible, so you have to go through that process of getting a sense of 'Ok, what actually happened back then?' And you've gotta get some historical perspective, and understand the powers that were involved, the events that went on. And so there's background that you need to pick up. But not only that...when you're dealing with the prophets there's not only the historical, ancient background to get. They are speaking off into the future about things that we haven't even seen yet. And so you're trying to figure out 'Boy, what are they talking about?' There's things out there ahead that we can't even imagine that the prophets are speaking about. And then there's the things in between that some of 'em are prophecies that are already fulfilled, and other things are prophecies that are not yet fulfilled, and sometimes it's hard to decide 'Was this fulfilled? Was it not?' given history.

It isn't just the fact that you're dealing and getting familiar with the ancient as well as trying to look into the future. The other thing that happens when you get into prophetic literature is the style, the way it's written. I mean, we like our truth and our information to come to us in nice, good, thematic statements with bulleted outline that we can read quickly, get to the bottom, and say this is what it's about. Or if we can't get it that way we really like it in a story with an exciting, page-turning narrative that we just can't wait to finish. The trouble is, when we go to the prophets we don't find an essay outline, and we don't find a narrative story. What we find is poetry with strong, visual imagery. It is written in such a way that the only way you can work with it is to slow down. And in our culture, that wants its information fast and quick, it's hard to slow down in the poetry, in the visionary writing of the prophets.

But probably the hardest part when you get into the prophets is they're not sequential, and we like things lined out in sequence. When you get in the prophets you'll have a vision that relates to something that took place back in the past. And then you'll have a vision about something that's gonna take place in the far future. And then you'll have a vision about something that may take place in the near future, and another vision about something in the past. And pretty soon it's all mingled in, and you're having a hard time figuring out which comes first here. I tell people when you move into the prophets it's like watching a preview of a movie. You know, where they'll show little scenes so that you'll wanna watch the whole movie? And then when you go watch the movie you'll find that those little preview scenes weren't in sequential order when you saw them in the theater. And you aren't given the plot in

between each scene, so you're trying to get something out of these pictures even though they're not in sequence and you don't have a plot in between. That's what it's like in the prophets, oftentimes.

It's a challenge to tell people "Just start reading." Well, I'm still gonna say that. But I'm gonna add some statements to that and build on how to read in a way that enables you to experience the prophets the way they should be experienced. And I'm using that word very carefully because I'm convinced that reading the prophets ought to be an experience. It's not just gathering information. That's why I'm convinced that going to prophecy conferences, putting charts up on your wall, and listening to prophetic speakers is not enough. It's why I'm convinced that reading through a fictionalized interpretation of somebody's idea of what it will be like in the future—that is not doing prophetic reading. In fact, those things will distract and distort sometimes. And in none of those do you experience prophetic writing the way it's meant to be experienced. It is written in strong, visual poetry because God wants you to...I use the word "experience"...it that way.

So how do you do that? Number one is you read with a good study Bible. Ok? I don't often tell people that. I'll tell 'em just start readin' the gospels, just start readin', just get any Bible you can find that's an accurate translation, it doesn't have to have any notes, just start reading. But when it comes to the prophets I say read with a good study Bible...and a *good* one. There's a lot of ones out there that are not good. So if you're gonna get into the prophets and pay attention to them like a light shining in the darkness, you need to invest in a study Bible. They're not that expensive when you think of the wealth of information that you get with them. The Bible that I've used for years, that I recommend first with most people is that they read the New American Standard Study Bible. And I'm gonna use just the terms like that, because if you went in to order it that's all you'd need to say—NASB Study Bible put out by Zondervan. There's another one very similar to that, an easier translation to read, called the NIV Study Bible. It has the same study notes. I just like the New American as a better study Bible, more accurate word-for-word translation. And we sell that one...and this isn't trying to make a profit here...I'm just lettin' you know that it's available on our book rack. We sell it at cost for thirty dollars...a very reasonable price for an amazing study tool. Gives you maps, gives you historical background, explains terms that are confusing, gives you a sense of the structure of the book and how the different sections are put together. It is indispensable in the prophets to have a study guide like that to read as you go. With that is another book I'd recommend and that I found. I've been reviewing it, I haven't completed my review of it, but it's enough so far...I'm giving it a double thumbs-up. And this is one I just really enjoy. It's put out by the...it's called the English Standard Version; that's the translation, a more recent translation, very accurate study Bible put out by Crossway Bibles. This one's more expensive, but it's more extensive in its notes. It's a great Bible as a study tool to have. It costs like forty-five to forty-nine dollars, and this is expensive when you go on Amazon to order it. But you know what? It's really cool. You can put it on one of these [holds up a small electronic device], alright? If you hook up through Kindle™ on Amazon it only costs nine dollars. These machines just amaze me anyway. I got a whole library on here, ok? And I got that ESV Study Bible on here for nine dollars. Ok? And I carry it anywhere I want, I can pick it up anywhere, anytime I'm...and I can just start reading. It's awesome! Now I'm not pushin' these electronic devices. I'm just sayin' there is some good to 'em other than games, alright? I mean, they still freak me out. I mean, that's voodoo that I can carry all that, ok? The scarier part is that these books are flyin' around in the air, you know, and \*phoom!\*, they're in here now, where'd it come from? Ok? That's just weird! But they're easy...I recommend that. Ok? Get it in electronic format if you want. It's a great way to do it. But get a study Bible.

Number two: read one prophet well. Most of the time when people want to start studying prophetic literature, and they wanna get a handle on it, they want to get to know it, they begin and they get a book on prophecy or they go to a conference, or something like that, and they're given a quote from Isaiah and another quote from Jeremiah, another quote from Daniel, and the expert then will take 'em into Ezekiel, and then link it up to something in Mark or Matthew, and then finally get into Revelation and put this whole big picture together, and you've got a verse here and a verse there, and you're all done, and now you see the future...but you haven't read a one of those books. And I'll tell you, you don't see the future.

This is the way I was taught prophets, and I'm old school on this. I grated...it just...it bugged me when our professor put us in this one little book of prophecy called Habakkuk. It's only like three chapters long. And I mean, I'm ready to capture...I'm ready to take on Isaiah, Daniel, and let me link it to Revelation, and I'm gonna know the prophecies. And he says, "No. You're gonna spend the whole semester studying the three chapters of Habakkuk." It was the best thing he could have done...the best thing. It's like learning a language. It's much easier, then, when you go on to learn the second language, or the third language. You get a sense of how things work. And when you're in Habakkuk you begin to get a sense of how the prophets speak, and how their visions flow, and you get a sense of some of the historical background as you do your research. And that will carry on as you go to other prophets. It's a great place to start, and I just can't say it strong enough. Pick one, and Habakkuk is a great one to start. It's

short enough that it's...that you can cover it. It covers every type of thing that you run into [in] the prophecies, from things that just astound you, a central truth that will go all the way through Scripture, and other things that will confuse you, and when you're done you're still shaking your head and say "What was that about?" It's a great book to go in and learn.

Third, as you work on that, read with patient humility. The statement by the Apostle Paul, and he says it when he's talkin' about prophecy, by the way, he says 'we prophecy in part, and we know in part.' There's limits to what we know. We only see part of the picture, we only know part of the story. And it's very important when you're dealing with the prophetic that you recognize we don't know everything. And you live with the unanswered questions. Very important in prophecy that you remember the reality, the truth, that God has told us 'You do not know it all.'

And then here's the key...if you are going to pay attention to prophecy as a light shining in the darkness, this the most important thing I can say...is do not read it to see the future. Do not read the prophets trying to sort out what's gonna be the next event, and the one after that, and how you can put a time line together and maybe even put a date on it. Do not read the prophets looking for a grand scheme of things and a picture of things that will enable you to pick up a newspaper today, put it next to your Bible, and say "Hey, did this happen, or that happen? Are we there? Are we there yet? Are we there?" Do not read the prophets to see the future. Do not.

Are you hearing me on this? I find when people do that they end up in either one of two states—either a frenzied, fervored obsession with trying to delineate everything and get dates on everything, or they give up on that and they end up very apathetic about prophecy and they say "Who knows, who cares. It'll all pan out in the end." Neither of those are biblical attitudes. Don't read to see the future.

You say, "Well then, why would I read the prophets?" Answer: read to see the God who forms the future. Remember the Cyrus prophecy I mentioned? In Isaiah? Interesting thing...when you read it and you look at it in its context, and you look at how it was presented and everything else, you'll discover that that prophecy, as dramatic as it is, as confirming as it is...that prophecy is not about Cyrus. That prophecy is not about him. It's about the God who named him and raised him up. Listen to Isaiah when he's talking to Cyrus in a vision; and he's speaking from God. And actually legend has it, and I can't confirm it for sure, but one Jewish historian says that Cyrus actually, in his time, read these words, that the prophet, 700 BC, a hundred and sixty years before Cyrus, speaking for God, speaking to Cyrus, says this:

*I call you by your name, I name you, though you do not know Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides Me there is no other God; I equip you, though you do not know Me...*

...and here's why...

*...that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides Me; I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and I create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things.*

Isaiah 45:4-7

The prophecy about Cyrus is not about him. It's about the God who named him and raised him up. And when you finish the prophecy of Isaiah, you go through the entire sixty-six chapters, you do not end up seeing the future in a time line with dates. When you finish the prophecies of Isaiah what you see is God like you've never seen him before, the God high and lifted up, around whom the angelic creatures cry, "Holy! Holy! Holy!" The God before whom the earth and the inhabitants of the earth are like grasshoppers. The God who will come in fire and justice and righteousness. The God, we are told, never grows tired, never grows weary, and as a result those who will wait upon Him, those who will look to Him, those who will rest in Him, will rise up like wings of an eagle as He lifts them instead of burdens them. And He is the God whose words are above our words, whose thoughts are above our thoughts, whose heart is beyond our heart...so much so that He is a God who will do what none of us would think of doing, and none of us can grasp, is He will forgive the sinner. And He is a God who, in the visions of Isaiah, would come to us in a servant and bear our sins, take our griefs upon Him, and die for our iniquities. That's what happens when you go into the prophets. You read to see God, not the future. And they will give you a view of Him you'll find nowhere else. It was that view of Him that sustained Israel through the dark years of exile. It is that view of Him found in the old prophets that sustained the church for the past two thousand years. And it is that view of Him we can have and gain in the prophets that will sustain us no matter how dark the present may get.

Pay attention to the prophets. Read with a good study Bible. Read one prophet well. Read with patient humility. And look to see God in 'em.

Next action step for you when you leave here today, and I'll give it to you, and you'll have seven minutes to do it, is you have to, first of all, order your study Bible if you don't have one yet. Ok? Get a study Bible. Download it on your iPhone...I don't care where you do it, how you do it...get it, a study Bible.

Next action step...I'm gonna give you two action steps, and only two...take that study Bible, whether it's in digital format or in a book, and you put it next to the place where you like to watch the news, or read the newspaper, or drink your cup of tea after the kids are in bed. Don't put it on a study shelf. Don't put it at your working desk. Put it next to that place where you tend to relax and read or watch.

When Joel taught me how to play the guitar I said, "What do I need to do?" He says, "You got a guitar?" I says, "Yeah, I got a guitar. What do I do, Joel?" He says, "Buy a guitar stand." "What?" "Yeah, buy a guitar stand." So I buy a guitar stand. "What do I do now?" "Put your guitar on it." And he says, "Let me show you three chords." He showed me three chords. That was it. He says, "Put it by your favorite chair." And sure enough, I'd sit there and there'd be my guitar. It talked to me. I began to pick it up, and I'd play these three little chords. You know what? I am now a maestro on the guitar. Very few people know that. No. I do know enough that I can enjoy it. In fact, I'd rather hear myself play than the radio.

That's the way you approach the prophets. Make 'em very accessible, and then just start exploring. And as you do, you'll begin to see God in a way that draws you back, over and over and over.

Let's stand.

I love Peter's confidence in his message, the gospel. Rooted in his eyewitness experience, rooted in the Old Testament prophets, he speaks with confidence. And he wants the next generation to hear it. We are the same. We want to speak the gospel with the same sort of confidence, rooted in the apostles' eyewitness testimony and rooted in the Old Testament prophets.

[Congregation sings the prayer song.]

Go and explore that truth in the prophets, and extend that grace in every conversation. Amen.