

her·me·neu·tics

HOW TO STUDY YOUR BIBLE

— an eight week course with pastor ben —

Lesson 8 Studying the Prophets

The prophets are a section of God's Word shrouded in mystery for many people. Prophets are either ignored or cherry picked for popular verses and chapters. Many people know very little about what happens in this section of God's Word, which accounts for nearly one fifth of our Bible and is almost as long as the New Testament!

There are good reasons why so many people fear these books. Unfortunately, many misunderstand how prophets operated. Some of the popular ideas and expectations for how prophets behaved don't match with what we actually find in Scripture. In addition, the historical context is assumed in these books perhaps more than in anywhere else in our Bible. While much of that history is available in the books of Kings and Chronicles, studying the prophets carefully often means studying Kings and Chronicles as well, which takes time and effort.

The rich imagery of the prophets also makes them challenging. Metaphors, similes, shocking statements, and illustrations all drawn from a foreign place and time causes confusion for the inexperienced reader of God's Word. Add to that the debates raging over how to understand prophecy and specifically what happens next in God's plan for the world, and it's understandable why many people would rather just stick to Psalms or Mark or Ephesians for their personal Bible reading.

But we can't do that. God revealed Himself to us in 66 books, and when we skip 16 of those books we are going to miss a big piece of the picture of what God is like. These books are challenging, but the payoff for studying them is a clearer understanding of who God is and how He works, for the prophets teach us much about God.

The Function of Prophecy

Many people are confused by the prophets because most people think of prophecy simply in terms of “What’s going to happen next?” What they get instead is books filled with messages of warning and judgment on Israel and other ancient nations for a variety of offenses. Some of the sins these nations are called out on we can relate to, such as caring for the poor, staying morally pure, and being people of honesty and integrity in our business dealings. Some of them seem odd and don’t resonate with us, such as Israel and Judah’s failure to keep Sabbath or seeking out foreign alliances? And where are all the prophecies about the future? In answering these questions, it’s important to realize that prophets had two roles, preaching and prediction. They would tell people what was going to be happening (foretelling) but they would also call people to repentance (forthtelling).

- **Forthtelling (preaching)**

Understanding the role of the prophets requires first understanding God’s covenant with Israel. At Mount Sinai God entered into a covenant, a solemn agreement between two parties, promising to be Israel’s God and care for them if they would obey His rules. The core of this covenant was given and ratified in Exodus 19-24. Unfortunately, immediately after confirming the covenant Israel broke the 10 commandments immediately and began worshipping the golden calf. This sets up a pattern of Israel’s vacillation between obedience and rebellion that characterizes the Old Testament.

As part of this covenant, God warned that he would send specific disasters on the people if they failed to follow His rules, but that He would also give blessings if His rules were followed. God’s covenant was conditional – there were blessings but only if the covenant was kept. If broken, the people should expect that famine, invasion, disease, and disaster would come their way. These lists of blessings and cursings can be found primarily in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 27-28. It would be a good idea to read through these chapters carefully several times. They are critical to the rest of the story of the Old Testament and especially the prophets. It was the job of the prophets to hold up the blessings and cursings of the covenant and to warn people what would happen if they continued in their sin.

“So, did the prophets predict the future?” you may be asking yourself. Yes, they did, but as a means to an end. The predictions of the future were to warn about the coming of God’s judgment or to give hope of God’s coming blessings. But the future itself wasn’t the main thing; how someone was living in the present was. If someone saw a prophet walking down the road, they wouldn’t think, “Cool, I wonder if he’s going to tell me something about the future.” They would rather be more likely to think, “Uh-oh, I’m about to get called out on my sin!” One theologian explained the role of the prophets as “covenant enforcers.” God sent His prophets when the covenant was not being followed to call the people to repentance. The prophets functioned more like revival preachers than they did like fortune

tellers. They constantly pointed people back to the warnings of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 27-28 and condemned Israel for her sins.

- **Foretelling (prediction)**

Having talked about the primary role of the prophets, it is still important to look at when they do discuss the future. Many are further confused because when the future is finally discussed, it's done so in ways that are perplexing. This is true for at least three reasons.

- 1. The OT prophecies are vaguer than we would like them to be.**

Some of this is simply because we modern readers don't always understand the symbolism and imagery that would have been clearly evident to the first readers. When the prophets talk about mountains and high places and "the mountain of the Lord" it can be helpful to realize that ancient peoples thought of high elevation as being where the gods lived. The Old Testament teaches that God lived on Jerusalem, a tall mountain, and so when the prophets say that Jerusalem or Zion would be exalted above all the other mountains, what they meant is that God's dwelling would finally be seen as the supreme location where the God of the whole world truly dwelt.

Some of this is because the prophecies themselves are just vague. A times we will find the prophecies simply refer to "he" or "they" and we aren't always 100% who is that pronoun referring to. Rather than clearly explain exactly how a prophecy will be fulfilled, the prophets often use metaphors and similes, describing God's work in broad brushstrokes rather than exact detail. This does not mean that we should take this as a license to interpret things spiritually. It's one thing to say, "God promised the nation of Israel a glorious restoration, but the details of exactly how that works are a little fuzzy at times" and quite another thing to say "God promised the nation of Israel a glorious restoration, but He was really talking about the church."

The prophecies of the Old Testament are also somewhat vague because we aren't always sure what exactly they refer to, and that leads us to our second reason the prophecy of the prophets can be confusing...

- 2. The OT prophecies sometimes have a near and a far fulfillment.**

There are times when we read prophecies of the Old Testament and we are left scratching our heads thinking, "Wait, was that fulfilled, or does it still need to be fulfilled?" The prophecies of the Day of the Lord fit in this category. The Day of the Lord contains apocalyptic imagery describing the end of the world, and yet when we read the prophets carefully they seem to be talking about the coming invasions of Assyria and Babylon. So which is it? Is the day of the Lord when Assyria and Babylon show up, or when Jesus comes to set up His kingdom? The answer is yes. The Day of the Lord refers to the day that God acts decisively to save His people and judge His enemies. That

day has come many times before and will come again. Some of these days are much bigger, like when Assyria and Babylon came to punish Israel. Ultimately this day will come when Jesus comes to set up His kingdom. But prophecies about the day of the Lord can refer to both the near day of the Lord and the far day of the Lord.

3. The OT prophecies sometimes combine different future events into one.

Not only can one prophecy refer to a near and a far fulfillment, but sometimes different events will be compressed into one. The classic illustration of this is looking at a mountain range. While the mountains might be separated by miles, they appear to be sitting right next to each other. Similarly, many prophecies that are separated by hundreds or thousands of years are put next to each other so that they seem to happen at the exact same time, when in fact they don't.

Take for example Christ's quoting of Isaiah in His opening message in Nazareth. In Luke 4:16-21 we read:

*16 And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read. 17 And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, 18 **The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, 19 To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.** 20 And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him. 21 And he began to say unto them, This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.*

However, if we go back and read the prophecy itself, we will find that Jesus stopped part of the way through verse 2. The entirety of Isaiah 61:1-2 reads:

*The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me;
Because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek;
He hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives,
And the opening of the prison to them that are bound;
To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD,
And the day of vengeance of our God;
To comfort all that mourn;*

Notice Christ stops right before the statement about proclaiming the day of vengeance of our God. Why? Because that is what Christ's second coming is for. This verse sees both

Christ's first coming and second coming and combines them in one verse with no indications that any time has lapsed.

Interpreting the prophecy of the prophets isn't as simple as we might like. Some ambiguity exists in the prophecies themselves, multiple prophecies are put together, and the same prophecy referring to different events can pose challenges to the careful student of God's Word. We can, however, get the message of the prophets, and that is the main point.

The Genre of the Prophets

We mentioned in a previous lesson that the Bible is an anthology – a collection of different types of writing compiled in one book. They include messages from the prophets, accounts of their visions, and historical descriptions of key events in their lives. They are a “greatest hits collection” of the prophets of Israel and Judah. Realizing this can be a real help in interpreting these books.

At the beginning of Hosea, the prophet's ministry is dated to the reigns of Jeroboam of Israel and of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah of Judah. This is about a fifty-year time period! And yet the book of Hosea is just fourteen chapters long. Hosea's ministry must have included much more than what we have in the book of Hosea. The book of Hosea then is a highlight reel of Hosea's ministry: the most impactful sermons and perhaps even highlights of these sermons. These messages and oracles of judgment and salvation are combined with historical information about Hosea's life that functioned symbolically to represent Israel's state.

This means that the prophets seem a lot more random than a New Testament letter. There is not a single, unified argument that runs throughout the whole book, like there is in Ephesians or Romans. If you start reading Jeremiah expecting to find a clear, organized structure with a single argument running throughout, you will be disappointed and confused. Rather, the prophets are collections of materials, some of which run together in ways that are hard to separate out into smaller units to study (more on that when we talk about outlining).

Studying the Prophets Using the Six Steps

Now that we have talked generally about the prophetic books, we will see how our understanding of the prophetic literature will influence the six steps we use for any portion of God's Word.

Study the Context

In our last lesson we observed that context, especially historical context, tended to be less important in poetry and wisdom genres. This week we will see the exact opposite. The context, especially the historical context, is crucially important.

- **Historical Context**

Imagine this Sunday your pastor stands in the pulpit and gives a message addressing the political scene today. He talks about Trump, Russia, Putin, Biden, Ukraine, impeachment, coronavirus, Nancy Pelosi, the Republicans and the Democrats, and seeks to give God's perspective on all these issues. Most Americans will understand exactly what he is talking about, because they are living through these events. Now imagine that 2,500 years later someone living in Africa reads a translation of that sermon. How confused will they be? As we come to the prophets, we are in a sense reading the politically charged messages of the prophets. Now, we must keep in mind that the prophets operated at a time when the political and the spiritual overlapped a lot more than they do today. During this time, the nation of Israel was the people of God, so for the prophets to call out God's people, things got political pretty quickly.

This means keeping in mind the big picture of Israel's history matters a lot! So let's take a quick walk through their history. God forms the nation of Israel, and after a long period of judges and three kings (Saul, David, and Solomon), the country goes through a civil war and splits in two. For the rest of the Old Testament, we have Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Israel descends into wickedness and idolatry much quicker, and in 722 B.C. is destroyed and carried away into captivity by the Assyrian nation. Judah in the south hangs on a little longer, but eventually they are captured as well by Babylon in three waves that came through, taking the best and the brightest, and leading to the destruction of the temple in 586 B.C. After spending 70 years in Babylon, the nation of Judah is allowed to return and must begin the arduous task of rebuilding their devastated country.

So where do the prophets fit in to this story? The books of Joel and Obadiah are not dated, and theologians disagree over when exactly they were written. Hosea and Amos are the only two of the books of the prophets that were geared toward Israel in the north. Amos ministered less than half a century before the fall of Israel, and Hosea was likely a contemporary who prophesied until the doom of the nation. Isaiah and Micah prophesied around the same time to the southern kingdom of Judah. Jonah tells the story of a prophet who was sent to the Assyrian capital during about 30 years before Assyria would devastate Israel, and Nahum records the prophecy predicting the downfall of Assyria after their initial repentance had been forgotten and the nation went back to their wicked ways. Zephaniah and Habakkuk prophesied about a hundred years after the fall of Israel, right before the rise of Babylon to world super power status. During the fall of Jerusalem, Jeremiah had a prophetic ministry in the city and Ezekiel and Daniel prophesied from Babylon. After the people returned Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi worked to encourage the people when they were discouraged and to rebuke them when they did wrong.

Knowing the big picture is helpful but knowing the specifics of what was going on when a book or a section of a book was written is also important. We find this information in two ways. First, we can read the accounts of the period of history found in other Old Testament books, normally Kings through Nehemiah. Many of the Old Testament prophets discuss current events assuming their audience knows what they are talking about, and so studying these books will be a big help. Also, like we did with New Testament letters, we want to study the books and passages themselves and perform a mirror reading, attempting to figure out what types of problems they are addressing.

Example: Amos prophesied against the corruption of Israel, particularly calling out the wealthy for their abuse of the poor. This inclines us to think that Israel is living in a time of prosperity and ease, as these are sins that wealthy, prosperous people have. Sure enough, Amos tells us that he prophesied during the reign Jeroboam (II) of Israel, and during this time Kings relates that Israel was experiencing a time of national peace and prosperity (2 Kings 14:23-27). Comparing what is written in a book with the historical background can be a big help in understanding the message.

- **Cultural Context**

You will want to pay special attention to the cultural context when studying the prophets. Some of their imagery and illustrations will make the most sense when you understand it from the perspective of someone living in ancient Israel. Again, reading good commentaries or having a good study Bible will help with this, as will realizing when something seems off or confusing that it might be a good idea to go look something up in a Bible dictionary.

- **Literary Context**

The literary context is important but challenging. Knowing where the units in the books begin and end is not easy, as we will discuss later. However, it's always important to make sure we know what someone means by what they say and ripping something out of context is just as possible in Nahum as it is in 1 Peter or Matthew.

Observe the Details

In this step, you will want to pay very close attention to what we have already said about paying attention to the context, especially the historical context, and what we are going to say about outlining, key words, and themes. Look carefully at the passage and always be asking "Why?" Why did the author say this this way, why did the author include that detail? What does mean by this odd parable or strange behavior? Is he quoting or alluding to something else in the Old Testament? What words, phrases, and ideas get repeated often?

It will also be helpful at this point to work through the poetry of the prophets. Don't forget that the prophets write in poetry. Studying the parallelism and the figures of speech will do a lot to uncover the meaning of the passage.

Outline the Passage

As we read through these books of collections of the messages and oracles written by the prophets, it can be challenging to know where one section ends and another begins.

Sometimes there is an obvious, clear break, such as...

- **Abrupt transitions from poetry to prose or prose to poetry**

Isaiah's message in Isaiah 5 is clearly over when we read the transition found at 5:30-6:1 "And in that day they shall roar against them like the roaring of the sea: And if one look unto the land, behold darkness and sorrow, And the light is darkened in the heavens thereof. In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple." These are some of the most obvious seams in the prophets.

- **Clear signals in the prophecy that a new topic has been taken up**

Sometimes even within the prophetic material itself it is clear where a new section begins. Haggai and Zechariah both include precisely dated prophecies. Malachi is set up as a series of statements made by God that the people of Judah find shocking. They reject God's statement, and so God argues His case. Habakkuk is structured around a question the prophet asked, and the response God gave. This is followed by another question by the prophet, and another response by God. The book ends with a psalm praising God and expressing trust in Him even when things are confusing and don't make sense.

Often, however, finding exactly where one prophecy ends and another begins will be hard and elusive. Phrases like "the word of the Lord came" or "Hear" or other key words and phrases may indicate a shift. Sometimes the subject matter changes drastically enough that we can detect a new unit. Often, the prophecies will blend into one another such that we can't know definitively where the seams originally were.

Study Key Words

As with other sections of God's Word, find key words that are important or hard to understand and dive in a little deeper. Specifically, there are at least two types of words that we should study.

Look up where cities, towns, and nations are located. While we may not always know exactly where these cities are located, in many cases we have at least a general idea and figuring out what they are referring to can help unlock meaning. If someone today says, I have not seen this anywhere from New York to Los Angeles, we know what they mean. If someone says, I'm from

Detroit she's from Charleston, we smirk because we realize there will be some big cultural differences between a Midwest industrial city and a southern coastal city. When someone says the spirit of Las Vegas is alive and well in our country, we know that is not a good thing. Cities have certain associations that the people of the day understand. As much as we're able, we should try to learn what those associations and locations meant for the prophets.

Also, as we've alluded to earlier, it's also very important to study the pronouns in the prophets. It can sometimes be hard to know what exactly the "he" and "they" of the prophets refer to. Paying careful attention to this issue will require careful, thoughtful meditation. Theologians might not even agree on what exactly different pronouns refer to, but knowing that there is disagreement and studying the options carefully is an important step in reading your Bible.

Study Themes

Thematic studies of the prophets are very valuable. Studying how a prophet or the prophets as a whole develop themes is a great way to unpack what these authors are trying to communicate.

- **Broad Overarching Themes of the Prophetic Literature**

As you read through the prophets, you will find that certain big ideas almost always come up in every letter. One author, J. Daniel Hays, has given this helpful summary of the major message of the prophets:

1. You (Israel/Judah) have broken the covenant; you had better repent!
2. No repentance? Then judgment! Judgment will also come on other nations.
3. Yet there is hope beyond the judgment for a glorious future restoration both for Israel/Judah and for the nations.

All the prophets together give this three point sermon. Not every prophet will develop each point equally, and some might skip a point here or there. But when you read all the prophets, you will find that these three themes permeate their works.

- **Themes Covering Several Books**

Some themes run throughout several of prophetic books. These can be themes of sins that Israel and Judah were guilty of, descriptions of God's judgment, and God's promises for the future. For example, here are just a few themes that are picked up on and developed by different prophets.

- **The Day of the Lord**

Also called simply "the day" or even "that day," this refers to the day when God will bring judgment on His enemies and will save His people from destruction. Joel, Obadiah,

and Amos spend a lot of time on this theme, but it is sprinkled throughout all the prophetic writings.

- **Israel and Judah's adultery**

The metaphor of God's relationship with His people as being like a marriage lends itself to the corollary image of idolatry and worldliness as being infidelity. Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea develop this image quite extensively.

- **God's anger at Israel and Judah's foreign alliances**

God wanted Israel and Judah to have a very simple national security plan: trust Him. While simple, it required tremendous amounts of faith to actually pull off, and most of the time these nations failed. Many of the prophets express God's anger at His people for their lack of faith.

- **Themes Covered within a Single Book**

Another option would be to simply take one book, like Hosea, and see what kind of things come up repeatedly in different ways in different parts of the book. This will include the broad 3 point sermon that permeates the prophets, and it may include some of the themes that span several books, but a prophet may also have a unique theme.

Example: In Hosea the theme of Israel's abandoning God because they were materially prosperous and of their love for that prosperity over God comes up over and over in the book for those who study it carefully.

Apply the Truth Personally

Finally, all of this brings us to the most important step: personal application. Applying the word of the prophets to our lives can be hard. Many of the sins they called Israel and Judah out for aren't a problem for modern day Christians. Most believers have never once been tempted to bow down to Baal or make an alliance with Egypt. In these cases, it's very important to get the big picture view of what is going on and attempt to find the underlying principles and apply them. God still desires that His people put their confidence in Him rather than the systems of the world, whether that system be an alliance with Egypt or the latest trendy church growth model.

Remember, we have said that application is broader than just "What should I do" but that it also includes how should I think about God, myself, and this world. The prophets teach us much about God. God speaks often and He speaks powerfully, using gripping images and moving metaphors in an attempt to wake up His spiritually sluggish people. We see in the prophets the depravity of man displayed in full color, as God's rebellious people turn away from Him again and again. We see both the mercy and the fury of God, and we are both warned and encouraged.

The prophetic literature is harder to read, there is no doubt about that. But it is rich in theology and rich in teaching. A careful study of these books will help you not only to have a better grasp

on the God's plan for the future, but will also help you to see God more clearly, to love Him more deeply, and to serve Him more faithfully.