

Studying Prophecy

Purposes of Prophecy

Much of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, consists of prophecy. Like other particular types of Biblical literature we have looked at, prophecy has certain characteristics that are important in correctly interpreting and applying the passage. Mickelsen offers several helpful comments:

The prophet spoke *from* God to the community *about* the community, *about* the nations round about, and *about* the world at large. (original emphasis) ... Prophecy does have a future aspect. But the prediction of God's doings was given to a particular historical people, to awake and stir them. They might not grasp all the meaning of the message, but the message – with the disclosure of future things – was given to influence the present action. (p. 287)

The future aspect of prophecy was not given to satisfy man's curiosity about the future. When interpreters force prophecy to function in this way, prophecy is being turned aside from its real purpose. (p. 288)

Eschatological expressions ... are not intended to whet the appetite of the curious who want to penetrate the future. Rather they are to show that God's program will move forward according to His schedule. (p. 288)

Hence the message of the prophet was meant to induce holy living and spontaneous, loving obedience to God. ... To lose sight of the original hearers and to focus our attention on what may tickle the fancy of the curious-minded in the present day is to lose sight of the very reason for the message. (p. 288)

With these strong exhortations in mind, an important part of our study of prophecy is to determine how the original audience understood the message, and what response was expected of them. That response is probably a good starting point for how we should understand and apply the passage.

When studying a prophetic passage, it may be helpful to remember the purposes of prophecy described by Archer (*A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, p. 297-298):

- Encouraging God's people to trust only in God's mercy and delivering power
- Reminding God's people that safety and blessedness were conditioned on their faithful adherence to the covenant, by a sincere submission of their will to obey God with their whole heart
- Encouraging Israel in respect to the future
- Authenticating the authoritative nature of God's message by the objective verification of fulfilled prophecy

Remember the purposes of prophecy in general, and try to determine the purpose of a specific passage you are studying. This perspective will help avoid the misdirected curiosity that Mickelsen warned about.

Difficulties in Prophecy

Sometimes the study of prophecy can be frustrating for several reasons:

- We don't know enough about the specific historical situation that the prophet is addressing. Often a careful study (observation, remember) can give us enough information to get the general idea. Bible dictionaries and commentaries can often fill in the gaps from archaeology and world history.
- The prophets often use figurative language to describe what might have been indescribable – the judgment of God or a massive military invasion or the destruction of a nation. As is often the case, avoid two extremes. First, don't be too quick to dismiss startling statements or images as exaggerated figures of speech, since prophecy often deals with issues or events beyond our

experience. Second, don't try to assign a meaning to every figure of speech used by the prophet – the “this means jet planes” approach. Sometimes an awe-inspiring image is meant to do just that, to inspire awe and wonder at God's power and plans, even if we can't pin down the details.

- Sometimes a prophetic message doesn't provide all the detail we would like to know. We need to remember that the prophet himself didn't have all the information, but was acting as God's spokesman. “When God spoke to and through his servants, he did not give them unlimited vision. Instead they were confined within a divinely limited perspective.” (Mickelsen, p. 294). The emphasis in this class has been the inductive study of individual passages, but ultimately prophecy in Scripture needs to be seen as a whole, as an “unfolding, expanding” process: “Later revelation often discloses elements omitted from earlier revelation. Even so the sum total of what God discloses does not comprise a complete picture.” (Mickelsen, p. 292) We still need to be diligent about studying a passage before we start cross-referencing to other places in the Bible. But prophecy, probably more than other types of Biblical literature, may need the added input from other studies.

Questions for Prophetic Passages

Asking good questions can also help draw the meaning and application from a prophetic passage. Use these questions as a starting point, but develop your own as you study the passage:

- What was the main problem (or a list of problems) the prophet was addressing?
- Who was the prophet addressing? Israel and/or Judah? A foreign nation?
- What was the content of his message? Call to repentance? Warning of God's judgment? Prediction of earthly punishment?
- What reaction did he expect from his hearers? A change in behavior? Fear of impending disaster? A better understanding and response to God's character?
- Are there parallels to apply between the prophet's original audience and my life personally? The church corporately? Our country nationally?