

OT Essentials: Punishment & Restoration

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Today is our last OT Essentials sermon and I want to focus on a theme and a set of OT books that we mostly avoid due to the subject matter and style. We are going to talk about the prophets this morning. When I say prophets I mean the books of the Bible that are considered prophetic literature. But in addition to talking about the prophetic books we're also going to focus on their themes, which I'm going to broadly state as *punishment and restoration*. Our faith in God will be quite shallow if we don't understand these two themes. The carnival version of God that the American church has primarily invited people to interact with is not turning out to be all that compelling or intriguing. This version of God demands nothing of us and it turns out he's quite easily discarded like we get rid of the cheap trinkets we win at the county fair. But a God who makes demands on us is one we have to stop and contend with. He forces us to look in the mirror and stop blaming others and take responsibility for our actions. This is the picture of God the prophets paint. God is kind and merciful, but he's also a consuming fire. This is all quite essential.

Let's start this way. Grab your Bibles and open to the very last page in the OT; or maybe it would be easier to find Matt 1; the first page of the NT. Now, keep a finger there and then search for the first page of the OT book of Isaiah. That's pages 566 and 807 in Bibles provided in the seats near you. These pages comprise what's often called *the prophets*. This is some of the least read portions of the Bible for a variety of reasons.

1. Like we talked about last week, it's primarily poetry. And poetry can be hard to understand. There are a lot of metaphors and symbolism; you have to read with different eyes when you read poetry. If you're a "get to the point" person, poetry can be hard to be patient with or appreciate because the authors aren't trying to "get to the point," but instead are trying to convey an emotional element of the point, which might take an entire chapter or song.
2. Another reason the prophets aren't often read and hard to understand is that they make a lot of references to people, places, and events from the OT. So, if you don't know the stories and the people from the OT books you'll probably struggle a lot understanding the prophets. I remember in my early years of pastoring in SD; I started teaching Hosea to a Sunday school class, but it was so hard. The class hardly could follow along. But I realized: they don't know the people, the places, the events Hosea is talking about. Every reference of Ephraim and David, Gilead and Samaria was like me picking up Harry Potter mid series - I'd be lost. So get this, FBC: one of the best ways you can understand the prophetic writings is to learn the stories of the OT. Read Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers. Then read Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles and just focus on what's happening; focus on the story. Your ability to understand the prophets will increase.
3. Finally, we don't read the prophets much because it seems depressing. There's a lot of judgment. This is where most people get the idea that the God of the OT is angry all the

time. But that's a childish reading of these books. Yes, God isn't happy about the corruption and injustice in Israel, but we're angry about the corruption and injustice in America ourselves; why wouldn't God be bothered by it? But along with the judgment and anger are words of hope, words of restoration. God promises grace, he promises a future. He's merciful. I'm looking forward to showing you that this morning.

Now, before we get into the meat of these OT prophetic books, let me spell out why they are essential for us: just like the people of Israel we need to be warned about our sin and have the fear of God stoked in our hearts. So much of what the prophets are trying to do is provoke repentance; they are trying to highlight where the people have gone astray so they can turn back to God. We need that, too. In fact, there are numerous NT books that do just that. Books like Hebrews, 1-2-3 John, Jude, Revelation, 1&2 Peter to some degree, have strong messages of warning so that we do not depart from the faith; so that we do not stumble - so that we would always keep the fear of God before our eyes. And that's what the prophets are often doing.

A common misunderstanding of the task of the prophets is that they are telling the future like some psychic warning us not to fly to Fiji because something bad might happen on the way. The prophetic words are God's words of warning; repent; turn back to God! Don't keep going down that wrong path! It reminds me of when I was a young boy, probably around 10, fishing with my dad. We were trolling around the lake and I got sick of holding my little fishing pole because I hadn't caught anything so I just set it on the bottom of the boat. And my dad said to me, "Brian, you're going to lose that rod if fish strikes." I said to him with all the confidence of a 10 year old know-it-all, "There's no fish in this lake!" As soon as I said those words, my line tightened up and my fishing pole went right into the water. My dad couldn't see the future! But he knew the consequences of my foolish actions and warned me. That's the way God warns the people in the prophetic books. "You're walking away from me; you're rejecting my path. That's not going to end well for you. Repent. Come back home to me and walk in my ways."

Let me show you this movement from judgment to restoration from the book of Isaiah as an example of what you see throughout the prophets. First turn to Isaiah 1 (READ vs. 1-4). Let me point out a couple of things just to get our bearings.

1. The opening verse indicates the focus. Isaiah the prophet sees and has been given word by God about the rebellion found in Jerusalem and Judah.
2. Look how poetry helps us understand at a deeper level what's going on. Isaiah doesn't just say, "Judah has rebelled against God." No, God wants us to feel the rebellion so he uses poetry. God says, "Children I have reared and brought up have rebelled against me." Any of you parents out there can relate to that? Just that little phrase taps into an emotion that goes straight to our hearts. We bore and raised these little guys and gals. We've fed them. Taught them. Sacrificed for them. Literally everything they have has been given to them. And now, they're rebelling. They're not grateful for our sacrifices. They are rejecting our values. And worse, they are rejecting us.

Vs. 4 is the key verse in highlighting the true problem. Look at the second half of 4, “They have forsaken the Lord, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged.” Something that’s important to see here in the prophets, but also in our own relationship with God, is that all of our sins are ultimately a turning away from the Lord. In a minute I’m going to highlight for you the affect our sin against God has on those around us and our world. But the biggest problem, the greatest offense that we need to repent of is how we disobey and disregard God. It’s always first and primarily a vertical problem that we need to repent of.

One of the things the prophets do really well is highlighting the specificity of the sins of the people. In Amos 4:1, for example, we read this, “Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, ‘Bring, that we may drink!’” Ok, what do we learn about these cows of Bashan.

1. Are they men or women? Women! These are women in positions of power who are rebelling against God and oppressing others.
2. They are from Bashan, which is in Samaria.
3. They are oppressive and their victims are the poor and needy. They are using their positions of influence to hurt the vulnerable.
4. They’re drunks. Their beaten-down husbands fetch them drinks all day long.

The next move the prophets often make is highlighting the impact of turning away from God. We see this in Isaiah a few chapters later in chapter 5; turn there with me and listen to what turning from God looks like in everyday living (READ vs. 20-23). Let’s break this down in bullet point fashion.

- The first thing that happens is we fail in our discernment. Rather than seeing God’s way, his words, his truth as good and right and beneficial, we actually start calling evil and the ways of darkness good and right and beneficial. That’s happening all around us, am I right? Whether we talk about what’s a *good* use of our time and energy; of what’s *right* in the area of sexual ethics; or what will *benefit* our walk with God, we’re getting all confused, aren’t we (we are! Don’t point the finger, point the thumb)?
- Next, in vs. 21, the next problem is an overestimation of ourselves. Nobody knows better than me! Let me ask you, friends: how often do you get advice about the things you’re going through in life? Parenting is pretty hard; are you humbling yourself and learning from others? Marriage is challenging; how willing are you not merely to ask for help in your marriage, but to actually do what a godly friend suggests will help? Friends, we are too wise in our own eyes.
- Vs. 22 is interesting: “Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine, and valiant men in mixing strong drink.” Clearly, Isaiah is bringing up drunkenness as a result of falling from God. But I think this could also serve as pleasure in general. When we are straying from God, guess what matters most to us? *Our* comfort, joy, pleasure, prestige....
- Finally in vs. 23, Isaiah brings up acts of injustice and oppression. That’s a logical consequence of this progression. Eventually, when you turn from God and exalt yourself and prioritize a life that is focused on you guess who pays the price? Other people;

usually people who are weaker than you. When it comes to what's best for me or thee, guess who I'm going to pick? Right. Me. And if I have to step over and hurt you in the process, so be it.

All of this focus on sin within the prophets is meant to call the people back to God. The message is "Repent! Turn back to God!" as we've seen earlier. But remarkably, there's another theme or message. And that message is restoration. Mercy. Grace. God's kindness is so unbelievable; his faithfulness to his promises of blessings are so sure and strong that we regularly see promises of restoration throughout the prophetic books. Pick any of them and I will show you God's commitment to do good to those who fear him and who turn back to him. We see this illustrated in chapter 14 of Isaiah (READ vs. 1-2).

But one of the things that's important to notice in the prophets is that God doesn't just promise forgiveness, mercy, and kindness, but he promises those things by means of a Savior, a hero. God has embedded deep within our human experience the need for a hero. From Snow White decades ago to the modern day Marvel movies, we can't get enough of heroes. It's why we are so amazed by and appreciative of first responders who run towards the trouble instead of away from it. Our greatest need, our need to be in a right relationship with God, is fixed or made possible by a Savior. God's Chosen One. Jump forward to chapter 42; this is where we see a particular focus on God's servant of blessing (READ vs. 1-4).

This isn't just found in Isaiah. Daniel, the Psalms, Jeremiah are just a few that come to my mind. In Micah, the prophet tells about a coming Messiah who will be born in Bethlehem and listen to what he will do (5:4), "And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth." God promised great and redeeming work through the prophets because of our sin, but that work is accomplished by a redeemer.

And, of course, Jesus is that redeemer. Turn with me to Matthew 12. Listen to Matthew applies the prophetic words about a Messiah to Jesus (READ vs. 15-21). I'm guessing that sounds familiar to you; it's from Isaiah 42, which we just read.

Why is this all essential? I've already touched on this, but let me say it again now after seeing this all from the scriptures: We need to fear God and to be aware of his punishment of sin; it's one of God's ways of keeping us in his family. Friends, please hear this: with our NT faith in Jesus and his death and resurrection, with the Holy Spirit living inside of us, we still need to be warned about the consequences of sin and fear God. Listen to some of these verses from the NT.

- 2 Cor. 5:11, "Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others."
- Acts 9:31, "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied."
- 1 Peter 2:17, "Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the Emperor."

Fearing God is an essential aspect of our NT faith. Friends, your fear of God will go up when you read the prophets. It's kind of like smelling salt; it will wake you up in a good way. But along with arousing our fear of God, reading the prophets reminds us of grace. After all the disobedience, in spite of their rebellious spirit, God was gracious to those who turned back to him. Friends, if God would forgive the nations of Judah and Israel, he will forgive you and me. I remember hearing the typical label of the angry God of the OT. And then I read it for myself and what jumped out to me when I read the OT was how gracious God is. So along with the fear of God rising in you when you read the OT prophets, your amazement and thrill of God's graces will increase, too. This is why the prophets are essential, too.