

# PROPHETIC PREACHING

then and now

by

Roland Q. Leavell

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## CHAPTER TWO

### PROBLEMS OF A PROPHET

**"Woe is me, my mother, that thou hast borne me a man of strife and a man of contention to the whole earth! I have neither lent money on usury, nor men have lent to me on usury; yet everyone of them doth curse me"** (Jeremiah 15:10).

Bless Jeremiah's old heart! Many a prophet like him, since his time, has bemoaned the day that his mother gave him birth. Many a preacher has been discouraged like Elijah was when under the juniper tree, after some modern Jezebel has crooked her finger at him in criticism or threat:

**"But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree; and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers"** (I Kings 19:4).

In spite of the heartaches that a prophet will have and the bitter tears he is likely to shed, his message need not be in vain.

Men will listen to preaching when it is prophetic preaching. They will listen to a polished nobleman like Isaiah, if he has had a vision of the Lord and is sure that GOD has said, **"Go, and tell this people"** (Isaiah 6:1-9). People will hear eagerly a rustic like Micah, if he has a message from GOD about the way to live, a message such as Micah had:

**"He hath showed thee, O man, what is good: what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy GOD?"** (Micah 6:8)

Men will flock to hear the warning to **"Prepare to meet thy God"** (Amos 4:12), if the preacher is seething like Amos with a God-given indignation at the personal and social unrighteousness of the privileged people about him. Men will follow the leadership of a man, if he like Moses has learned the secret of victorious living during a mountaintop experience of communion with GOD. People will love a preacher, if he like Hosea is possessed with a heart-gripping emotion about the love of GOD. People will be eager to go hear a man like Isaiah who comforts and encourages and allures to the One by whose stripes men can be healed.

#### **Perils of a Prophetic Preacher**

No thinking man enters a preaching ministry for his own benefit. No one desires to be thought of as a fanatic, or troubler of Israel. Prophets are badly needed, but they are not universally wanted.

The Lord JESUS said: "**A prophet is not without honor, save in his own country, and in his own house**" (Matthew 13:57). He wept over Jerusalem as he lamented, "**O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee**" (Matthew 23:37).

The Apostle Paul did not encourage young men to enter the ministry as a place of ease and security. He exhorted Timothy to endure hardness as a good soldier of JESUS CHRIST (II Timothy 2:3), and Chapters 3 and 4 are given to details of the difficulties and opposition he must face. The recitation of Paul's perils, given in II Corinthians II, would turn any young man away from the ministry except one who is conscious of a divine call.

The author of Hebrews, in the chapter that has been called the roll call of the prophets, wrote:

**"Others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword"** (Hebrews 11:36-37).

In spite of the sufferings of the prophets JESUS said:

**"Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in Heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you"** (Matthew 5:11-12).

### **Prophets Must Be Models of Courage**

Preaching about moral living and on controversial issues is always unpopular and sometimes perilous, when the people desire a way of life which is contrary to the righteousness of GOD.

A prophet usually is criticized and often persecuted if he preaches social reformation, Christian attitudes toward minorities, reform in politics, sobriety regarding alcoholic beverages, and sanctity of the marriage vow. In Old Testament times the priests, false prophets, plutocrats, and even the royal families turned bitterly against the prophets who preached righteousness. Unholy people want to preserve the status quo.

- tradition says that Isaiah was sawn asunder.
- Jeremiah suffered untold vilification, bitter hatred, plots against his life, horrible imprisonment in a miry cellar, and abduction into Egypt to eke out his old age in exile.
- Amos was driven out from Israel by Amaziah the priest at Bethel.
- John the Baptist was imprisoned and then beheaded.
- the blessed Lord JESUS was nailed to a cross.

To preach prophetically necessitates that one live dangerously. It always requires conviction, character, and courage.

One may be:

- threatened like Peter,
- imprisoned like Paul,
- banished like Chrysostom,
- martyred like Savonarola,
- excommunicated like Luther,
- refused the use of pulpits like Wesley,
- asked to resign like Jonathan Edwards,
- banished like Roger Williams,
- or be the victim of jealousy like multiplied thousands of successful preachers.

Through it all a modern preacher may well have statesmanship like Isaiah, courage to stand alone for right like Elijah, clarity of thought like Micah, longsuffering like Jeremiah, and love like Hosea.

Lincoln spoke like a prophet when he said, "I am not bound to succeed, but I am bound to be true." GOD does not promise a prophet success, much less popularity; GOD promises spiritual power.

This much is certainly true: a preacher himself must wear the breastplate of righteousness when he reproves the faults of others, or else the one whom he is attacking will stick him under the fifth rib with a public revelation of the preacher's shortcomings. Only a right way of living can give a preacher the rightful privilege to preach righteousness to others.

### **Church Life Is Complex and Demanding**

One of the perennial problems of a would-be modern prophet is the demand upon a preacher's time made by so many other things that he does not have time to prepare his sermons. It is unspeakably tragic for a preacher to "**beat the air**" before his congregation, unprepared in mind as well as heart for his prophetic mission of heralding some eternal truth from GOD.

Church life is growing more complex and more demanding all the while. The organizations demand time. Pastoral duties are pressing. Calls for counseling are clamorous. Denominational engagements are constant. Civic responsibilities are numerous. All these make disastrous inroads into a preacher's time for study, prayer, sermon preparation, and meditation.

A pastor of a moderate-sized church cannot do everything that some people expect of him.

A preacher is expected to:

- make more calls than a physician,
- settle more problems for people than a lawyer, and
- write more articles than the editor of a county newspaper.

A pastor must be a better financier than a bank cashier, for people bring their money to the bank,

but the pastor must raise the church budget through voluntary gifts.

He must be a better organizer than a mill superintendent, for he must keep his organization intact with volunteer labor.

He must be a better scholar than a teacher or professional lecturer, because they use their material over and over, but a preacher must deliver new sermons with fresh approaches to the same people week after week.

A preacher must maintain better public relations than a congressman; a congressman can get elected by only 51 per cent of the votes, but a preacher must stay elected by virtually 100 per cent of the deacons and other members.

A pastor is called upon to perform both priestly and prophetic functions. Like a priest he must counsel, comfort, conduct funerals, perform wedding ceremonies, and visit people. Like a prophet he must commune with GOD, prepare sermons, and then herald zealously the good news about GOD's forgiving love and sustaining grace through CHRIST.

The multitude of priestly services should never be allowed to usurp the place of prophetic preaching.

Preaching is the supreme task of a prophet; preaching should be given the supreme place in his ministry. The good should never be allowed to become an enemy to the best. It is pathetic when a preacher comes to church on Sunday morning unprepared to preach, fearfully uneasy and nervously ill-at-ease because he has to say something, rather than joyously excited because he has something to say.

Mature preaching comes from fervent prayer, arduous study of GOD's Word, and quiet meditation about every phase of the message. Many prophets of old developed their messages while they were in solitude with GOD:

- Moses on Sinai,
- Elijah at Cherith,
- Amos while tending the herds,
- Jeremiah in eschewing wedding feasts,
- Ezekiel in exile,
- John the Baptist in the wilderness of Judea,
- Paul in Arabia.

While in quiet detachment a prophet may hear the "**still small voice.**"

### **Prerequisites of a Prophet**

The first prerequisite of a prophetic preacher is to feel that GOD has laid his hand upon him and thrust him out irrevocably into a preaching ministry. A pastor or organizer or promoter may be developed out of almost anyone who has abilities which he will dedicate in service. Such is not true of a prophet. Some enter a preaching ministry and flame up for a time like a torch, but the

torch fire soon dies if it is not lit on the altar of Heaven by GOD's eternal purpose.

A prophetic ministry is not the place for occasional tourists.

- Moses had such a life-changing and destiny-determining call in Horeb when he saw the burning bush.
- Isaiah had that experience while he was worshipping in the temple (Isaiah 6:1-10).
- Jeremiah in Anathoth heard the call of GOD, saying that he was ordained of GOD to be a prophet unto the nations (Jeremiah 1:4-5). Without that conviction, he could never have endured all that he did.
- It was on a stormy day in Babylon that Ezekiel heard the voice of the Spirit expressly commissioning him to preach to the children of Israel (Ezekiel 1:4; 1:28-2:3).

Throughout the records and writings of the prophets there are thrilling accounts of how GOD spoke to men and through them to the multitudes (Joel 1:12; Amos 7:15; Jonah 1:1-2).

Modern prophets well may emulate the traits of the prophets of old.

- these men of GOD had unimpeachable moral characters and unwavering courage.
- they were deeply pious, sincerely humble.
- they were unceasing in their prayer life.
- they had convictions about right and wrong, and were willing if necessary to die for the right.
- they displayed unflinching courage in the delivery of their messages from GOD, and were heroically brave under persecution.

The prophets were princely pulpiteers, a quality born of an intense sense of mission, deep convictions, heart-felt love and proper training. Some were eloquent; some were plain-spoken; some were fiery. Some prophets used words which pierced like a rapier; some thundered loudly into the hearer's ears; some sobbed out their broken-hearted appeals. They used visions, imagination and dreams. They drew upon the resources of history, literature, and poetry. Their sermons were made vivid with illustrations from nature and from everyday life. Every art of effective speaking was used - figures of speech, humor, sarcasm, emotion, teaching, controversy, evangelistic appeal.

The prophets were different each from the others and individualistic, yet all of them spake in the language of the average man. Any man on the street who heard could know what was in the prophet's heart. If their messages had been over the people's heads, they would have missed both heads and hearts.

### **Preaching Materials for the Prophets**

"What shall I preach about?" is a question every preacher faces when he realizes that inevitably Sunday is coming. The prophets might have the answer. These men had sources from which they drew material in their sermon preparation, beyond the fact that they were what someone has called "God-intoxicated" men and men of incessant prayer.

Many prophets drew some of their sermon material from the revelation of GOD in nature. When

men like Amos and Micah meditated deeply while in the solitude of GOD's wide open fields and under GOD's starry skies, the heavens declared the glory of GOD to them (Psalm 19:1). It produced preaching as rugged as the mountains. as broad as the horizon, as clear as sunshine.

Some prophets were brilliant students of the writings of Moses and the writing prophets of earlier centuries. Jeremiah and Ezekiel both came from priestly ancestors, and they grew up in homes where such writings were available. The influence of the older prophets on them is easily discernable in their recorded sermons. It is natural that such students should have preached an profound doctrines such as the majesty of GOD, the sinfulness of sin, repentance, the grace of GOD, salvation, love of GOD, and judgment.

The so-called literary prophets - Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Zechariah, and so forth - were the most influential men of their generations, and they have been profoundly influential in all the centuries since their times.

The writings of the prophets had a literary quality which indicated their thorough education. Some of them were gifted poets. Some were masters of the study of ethics. Most of them were familiar with history. Those who knew history knew how GOD had judged various nations and various people for various ways of life. Therefore, they could foresee and foretell the judgments of GOD which would come upon those who lived under similar conditions. Almost all of them were masters of theology, a subject which is called the "queen of the sciences."

Such prophets as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Micah, and Habakkuk were discerning students of international relations, current events, and national trends. Men like Ezekiel were students of people. **"He sat where they sat,"** beside the river Chebar; that is, he saw life from their point of view and could understand their problems. From that viewpoint he could comfort, encourage, allay fear, counsel, and instruct.

Since he understood them so well, he could preach to them intelligently, sympathetically, and helpfully.

Whatever else may be said about the prophets, they were not what someone has called

"preacherettes preaching sermonettes to Christianettes."

It is certain that they were never dull. No real prophet of GOD needs ever to get into a rut in his preaching, becoming as monotonous as a child playing on a piano with one finger. Sermons can come like telegrams, not like reading last week's newspaper. With all the vast material for preaching which may be found - in the Bible, in books, in nature, in current events, in the life problems of the people - preaching can be made dynamic, prophetic, if sufficient time and study and prayer are given to the preparation of sermons.

The more exalted and demanding the task, the more exacting the preparation and delivery of sermons should be. "Quick-mix" sermons are neither very appetizing nor very nourishing to those who are hungry for spiritual food.

**FOR BIBLE STUDY AND DISCUSSION**

1. When can we have assurance that our message will not be in vain?
2. Mention some Scripture passages which may encourage a preacher in times of difficulty, opposition, or despair.
3. Discuss: "To preach prophetically necessitates that one live dangerously."
4. Do you feel that the growing complexity of the preacher's work is a wholesome trend? Give reasons for your answer.
5. What suggestions can you give for solving this problem.

Discuss the prerequisites of a prophet - then and now.

Answer the question as completely as you can: "What shall I preach about?"

~ end of chapter 2 ~

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