

PROPHETIC PREACHING then and now

by

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CHAPTER FIVE

PROPHESYING DOWNFALL BECAUSE OF SPIRITUAL DECAY

"O Jerusalem, wash thine heart from wickedness, that thou mayest be saved" (Jeremiah 4:14).

It is prophetic preaching when a man of GOD warns people that the wages of sin is death. The Old Testament prophets from time to time foretold some defeat or disaster which was inevitable unless the nation repented. No nation or civilization has even fallen when the people were trying to be right with GOD.

The prophets were exercising patriotism of the highest quality when they were warning people against some impending doom because of their ungodliness.

Such was the case when Amos saw GOD measuring Israel with a plumb line, showing that the nation was like a leaning wall which would collapse in due time (Amos 7:7-9). He saw the nation to be like a basket of overripe fruit, ready to rot away (Amos 8:2). His plea of warning was, **"Seek ye the Lord, and ye shall live"** (Amos 5:6). GOD's laws are inexorable. Hosea expressed it when he said, **"They have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind"** (Hosea 8:7). GOD's law is that whatsoever a man soweth he shall reap in kind, and the fruitage of sin is death.

Forgetting the Lord

The basic sin against which the ancient prophets cried with frenzied zeal was that of forgetting GOD. Jeremiah lamented: **"Can a maid forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire? yet my people have forgotten me days without number"** (Jeremiah 2:32).

Such forgetfulness of GOD is an expression of practical atheism.

Forgetfulness of GOD expresses itself in many different ways.

There are people whom society calls good people, who are good to their children, do not beat their wives, pay their debts, and stay out of jail, but who leave GOD completely out of their lives. They take no time to worship GOD at church, they have no money to give to GOD's

causes, they take no interest in studying GOD's Word, and they make no efforts to lead others to CHRIST.

They are not wicked but are just plain ungodly.

Others who have worshipped GOD at one time grow so accustomed to his blessings that they forget to give thanks. Still others cannot resist the influence of the ungodly crowd, so they conform to the fashion of worldliness or wickedness rather than be different from other people.

When the experience of forgetting GOD conceives, it gives birth to sin: and sin when it is full-grown, bringeth forth death (James 1:15). The prophets of GOD were able, like good physicians, to discern the cause of Israel's spiritual illnesses, able to foretell the results if they were not checked, and able to prescribe the remedy. They knew that both personal and national downfall eventually would come from the infectious germ of forgetting GOD.

One symptom of having forgotten GOD is idolatry. It stirred the souls of the prophets when the people of Israel followed the nations round them in worship of Baal. The destruction of Baalism became a life and death issue with Elijah when he challenged the priests of Baal to a contest on Mt. Carmel. Baal was thought to be the god of fertility, not a god of morality. Worship of Baal appealed to the desires for abundant crops and large families.

When the GOD of righteousness was left out, these desires led to covetousness and adultery, and both sins were committed in the name of religion. Then, as always, men became like the god they worshipped. Baal was a god utterly without a moral standard. The theology of the people determined their morals; erroneous worship led to an erroneous walk.

With withering sarcasm Isaiah compared impotent idols with omnipotent GOD (Isaiah 46:1-8), and attributed Judah's captivity to idolatrous worship.

Jeremiah likewise attacked idolatry with devastating bitterness (Jeremiah 10:1-11), while he exalted the Lord. In speaking for GOD he said, "**My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water**" (Jeremiah 2:13).

Jeremiah saw that idolatry not only violated the first of the Ten Commandments but also two other teachings of Moses in Deuteronomy:

- first, they should have only one altar for pure worship (in Jerusalem, Jeremiah thought),
- and the people of Israel should not mix with other nations who worshipped foreign deities.

Ezekiel spoke the word of GOD to the elders of Israel, telling about the fate of those who turned away from the Lord to worship idols:

"Repent, and turn yourselves from your idols; and turn away your faces from all your abominations. For everyone of the house of Israel, or the stranger that sojourneth in Israel, which separateth himself from me, and setteth up his idols in his heart, . . . I will set my face against that man, and will make him a sign and a proverb, and I will cut him off from

the midst of my people" (Ezekiel 14:6-8).

Habakkuk railed against the folly and disaster of idolatry (Habakkuk 2:18-20).

In Zephaniah's time there was worship of the sun and moon, incense was burned to Baal, and priests of heathen gods were supported. The prophet vigorously warned that the fierce anger of GOD would sweep the nation away like the wind blows chaff (Zephaniah 2:1-3).

There are no new sins, and none has gone out of style.

Baal is not dead; he has just changed clothing. In modern times sin may have changed its form, but it has not changed in spirit and essence. This is particularly true of idolatry.

Baalism of today may be over-anxiousness about prosperity, worship of wealth, or greed for gold. Baal often goes to church. The New Testament says covetousness is idolatry. It is sure idolatry when men worship the almighty dollar.

- the shrine of the god of gold is at the national bank.
- the shrine of the god of fashion is at the department store.
- the shrines of the god of pleasure are scattered throughout the land.
- it becomes a shrine for idol worship when a man puts himself or anything else on the most exalted throne of his desire or endeavor.

Modern idolatry should stir prophets of GOD to their highest intensity of horror and noblest efforts of attack, just as Baalism did in days long ago.

Men without GOD may hunger and thirst for him without knowing what they desire.

Augustine was right when he said, "Thou hast made us for thyself, and we find no rest until we find our rest in thee." When the truth is known, worldly people are often desperately thirsty in their souls for GOD, for the living GOD (Psalm 42:2). Prophets like Amos know that nothing less than GOD can satisfy that spiritual thirst.

"And they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, and shall not find it. In that day shall the fair virgins and the young men faint for thirst" (Amos 8:12-13).

A true prophet of GOD draws constantly from the deeps of GOD's truth in order to give people the water of life.

Insincere Worship of the Lord

Another sign of spiritual decay is insincerity of worship. Some who go through the motions of worship are rank hypocrites, having the form of godliness but denying the power of it. Others think they are self-sufficient, without need of GOD. Isaiah said, "**Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight**" (Isaiah 5:21). Some others are formalists, satisfied with rituals, ceremonies, and liturgies, without deep spiritual experiences with GOD or

without sincere moral purpose in their lives. Amos cried out against this kind of insincerity:

"Come to Bethel, and transgress; at Gilgal multiply transgression; and bring your sacrifices every morning, and your tithes after three years and offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving with leaven, and proclaim and publish the free offerings: . . . I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies. Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them: neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts" (Amos 4:4-5; 5:21-22).

The prophet's message in essence was to have GOD in the heart, for immorality inevitably follows in the wake of insincere religious pretense.

During the reign of King Uzziah the prophet Isaiah saw that national prosperity was causing a disastrous decline of sincere worship, even while there were lavish and numerous sacrifices being offered in the Temple, and multitudes of people going to a multiplicity of meetings.

"Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination to me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them" (Isaiah 1:13-14).

One wonders what Isaiah would say about the multiplicity of church meetings in a highly organized church of today, where church work often is mistaken for the spiritual work of the church. The thing that matters is what GOD sees in the hearts of those who go to so many church meetings. Isaiah preached that unbelief was the basis of their sham religion, and that lack of faith in GOD was sure to bring doom upon them (Isaiah 7:8-9).

Jeremiah deplored a hollow worship in the Temple.

The sacrifices became occasions of feasting on good roast beef instead of days of repentance and renewal of vows to GOD.

"Put your burnt offerings unto your sacrifices, and eat flesh. I spake not unto your fathers, nor commanded them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices: but this I commanded them, saying, Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and ye shall be my people: and walk ye in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well with you." (Jeremiah 7:21-23).

As a result of the perversion of the sacrifices from acts of faith to acts of feasting, he predicted that the ark of the covenant would be carried away, the Temple would be destroyed, the entire sacrificial system would be abandoned, and even that Jerusalem would fall. In spite of the dire predictions, the prophet sobbed out the invitation of GOD to be saved: **"Return ye backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings"** (Jeremiah 3:22).

During Hosea's time of prophecy there was plenty of sacrifice, but in reality they had forgotten GOD. Their daily lives showed it, for they were given to swearing, lying, killing, stealing, adultery, and drunkenness - the fruits of their inner life (Hosea 4:1-2).

The sins of the people were like sword stabs into the prophet's heart. For people to be within their hearts so insincere toward GOD and in their daily lives so viciously licentious was to Hosea like a wife being untrue to her husband (Hosea 4:18; Chap. 3).

The classic pronouncement about sincere and insincere worship was made by Micah. He said the popular forms of sacrifices, ceremonies, and rituals in which his people were imitating other people were an abomination to GOD. He proclaimed one of the most exalted of the Old Testament interpretations of what GOD desires from men:

"Wherewith shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the high God? shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" (Micah 6:6-8).

These old prophets got to the heart of the matter by requiring that worship come from the heart; the heart of worship must be from the heart of the worshipper. Man can offer GOD nothing that will be acceptable to him unless it is given from a heart of genuine repentance, sincere love and worthy worship.

One of the heavy burdens on a modern prophet's heart is how to promote sincere and spiritual worship even by those who attend preaching services.

When the piercing eye of GOD looks beyond other motives for church going, such as the influence of habit, the pleasure of social contacts, the loyalty to the pastor or class, or even motives which are more unworthy than these, just how much genuine sincerity of worship does he see in the hearts of the church-goers? It is a goal of a prophetic preacher to deliver a heart-warming message from GOD who is revealed in CHRIST, so that every worshipper will see GOD, will love GOD, and will go forth to serve GOD.

Goldsmith expressed it beautifully:

"Truth from his lips prevailed with double sway,
And fools, who came to scoff, remained to pray."

- The Deserted Village

Call for Repentance and Faith

A present-day preacher can never be more certain that he is walking in the path blazed by the prophets than when he is calling for sincere repentance of sin, for soul gripping faith in GOD, and for humble worship before the throne of Deity. From the time of the dynamic and spirit-filled preaching of Joel during the eighth century before CHRIST until the tender tones of CHRIST were heard in Galilee, the prophets declared that GOD expects men to repent in their minds and hearts if they expect salvation. Joel said:

"Therefore also now, saith the Lord, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning: and rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God" (Joel 2:12-13).

The prophets knew that sin is a corrupting, killing foreign substance in the soul like a splinter in the hand. It brings festering, pain, and poison. The hurt cannot be healed until the cause of it is removed.

If a preacher wants to stir up his heart on Saturday night so he can preach prophetically on Sunday morning, let him walk up and down some hallway, reading aloud such passages on repentance as may be found in the fourth to sixth chapters of Amos, the fourteenth chapter of Hosea, the fourth and fifth chapters of Jeremiah, and the eighteenth chapter of Ezekiel. It will help any preacher to imbibe the spirit of John the Baptist who boldly exhorted people to bring forth fruits meet for repentance.

No preaching can have a piercing, prophetic quality which does not warn about the doom of forgetting GOD, which does not call for repentance for sin and faith in CHRIST to save.

FOR BIBLE STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Discuss which nations at one time during the Christian era have been most prominent in international affairs, but have fallen into mediocre power. In each case what sin has been most outstanding in causing the nation's downfall?
2. What is the most dangerous symptom that the people of America are forgetting God-worship of money? pleasure madness? drunkenness? home-breaking and divorce? crime? Sabbath-breaking? or what?
3. How can a pastor best promote humble, spiritual, sincere worship at the preaching service on Sunday morning?
4. Is either "quitting your meanness" or "doing better" identical with repentance? Define and contrast reformation, remorse, penance, godly sorrow for sin, repentance.
5. How was genuine repentance brought about and how was it manifested in the following Bible characters - Job? David? Isaiah? Peter? Paul? Zacchaeus? The Philippian jailer?

~ end of chapter 5 ~

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