

PROPHETIC PREACHING

then and now

by

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CHAPTER THREE

PREACHING DURING NATIONAL CRISES

"Thus saith the Lord unto me; Go and stand in the gate of the children of the people, whereby the kings of Judah come in, and by the which they go out, and in all the gates of Jerusalem; And say unto them, Hear ye the words of the Lord, ye kings of Judah, and all Judah, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem" (Jeremiah 17:19-20).

Under GOD, the prophets were the builders and saviors of their nation.

- Moses founded the theocracy.
- Samuel founded the monarchy.
- Ezekiel reorganized the nation out of the chaos of Babylonian captivity.

A business man said to a preacher, "You preachers should stay out of the affairs of the state or nation. Politicians should run the government and preachers should attend to church affairs."

The preacher replied, "Then we should tear out of the Bible most of the preaching of the Old Testament prophets."

A prophet of GOD should sit as it were on a lookout point and observe everything that degrades or destroys the moral and spiritual life of the people and the nation. If there is evil, he should become a troubler and disturber, as was Elijah (I Kings 18:17). Preachers who have prophetic judgment may take national crises as golden opportunities to preach social righteousness or social reform or heart-felt repentance or national humility before GOD.

Crises Inspire Prophetic Preaching

Much of the greatest preaching by the Old Testament prophets was inspired by some national or international crisis. The prophets analyzed causes of crises, predicted impending doom, and outlined the way of national wisdom. They preached authoritatively about the administrative policies of their governments whenever they involved moral integrity, social righteousness, legal justice, national security, or the personal influence of the rulers over the people. They were criticized as "political preachers," as was Amos (Amos 7:12-13), and were asked "to resign."

But they preached on.

Old Testament history is full of illustrations of how GOD prepared and called brave men to prophesy for him in time of a national crisis. Moses set the example for all the prophets who came after him. He did not hesitate to strive with Pharaoh about granting freedom to the Israelites. Hosea said of him: "**By a prophet the Lord brought Israel out of Egypt, and by a prophet was he preserved**" (Hosea 12:13).

Samuel became the "**strong man**" of his nation during the crisis of the period of transition from the leadership of the judges to the rulership by the kings. He reorganized the nation, and he bound Israel to GOD through his prayers and his godly leadership. He lifted the standards of the people for peaceful living, for personal purity, and for sincerity of worship.

Elijah burst into the life of Israel like a sweeping tornado - bold, zealous, fiercely denunciatory of evil men and idolatrous practices. He was not timid about opposing King Ahab and Queen Jezebel concerning the introduction of idolatry into the land. He preserved the nation from Baalism and its fateful effects. Modern prophets can imitate him by striving to turn men from their shrine of worship at the national bank or the restaurant. Modern Jezebels need to be turned from worshipping at the dress shop or some place of worldly pleasure.

Amos was like an ancient edition of U.S. News and World Report, with the Spirit of GOD as the editor.

- he had been trained in the theological school of solitary communion with GOD while he tended flocks and gathered sycamore fruit (Amos 7:14).
- he became internationally minded through contacts with caravans of people who came from all over the known world to trade.
- he used a survey of the sins of other nations as a plan of approach, and then moved into denunciatory preaching about unholy conditions prevailing in Israel.

It was not his type of prophetic preaching to say "**peace, peace**" when there was no peace. With rugged boldness Amos proclaimed to Israel the moral law of GOD upon which a nation must be built if it endures.

They are dark days always for any nation when there is no prophet in the land in the time of crisis. Every national ruler - be he king or prime minister or president - needs a prophet who can stand by him and advise with a "**Thus saith the Lord.**"

History has no more inspiring picture of a spiritually-minded preacher-statesman advising and encouraging a king in a national crisis than the story of how Isaiah was the stabilizing influence with Hezekiah when Jerusalem was being besieged by the mighty army of Assyria (Isaiah 37).

Isaiah was fitted admirably to be an incisive thinker and interpreter of internal national affairs, to be the trusted adviser of kings. He took every opportunity to warn the king against putting any trust in Assyria, and to urge him not to have any confidence in Egypt. He bitterly denounced the folly of the king when he showed all his treasures and military might to the Babylonians (Isaiah 39). With daring faith Isaiah predicted a Messiah who would save the nation and who would set

up an ideal social order (Isaiah 2, 7, 9, 11).

Jeremiah spent most of his prophetic ministry preaching about Judah's foreign policy toward nations such as Assyria, Egypt, and Babylon. He was called of GOD to the specific task of preaching on international affairs.

"Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth. See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant" (Jeremiah 1:9-10).

No braver prophet ever preached than did Jeremiah during the tragic decline and dissolution of his nation.

For many years he preached on national affairs, fearlessly denounced the kings for their foolhardiness, and unceasingly urged the leaders to hear and heed the word of GOD. His mighty preaching fell on deaf ears, for the record does not tell that he ever won a single convert. At times he became woefully discouraged but he did not resign.

As crisis after crisis arose, prophet after prophet arose to preach the word of the Lord about them.

- Nahum vigorously denounced Nineveh.
- Zephaniah declared that his nation had come to a day of wrath, a day of distress and trouble, a day of danger that her high towers would be assaulted (Zephaniah 1:15-16).
- Ezekiel, Daniel, and Isaiah lived in the dark night of captivity, but they pointed to signs on the horizon which gave hope for the sunrise of national redemption. Their optimism which was born of faith is worthy of emulation.

The United States has faced continual crises during the past generation - three wars, a disastrous depression, the aggression of Communism, the repeal of the prohibition law with a subsequent flooding of the country with alcoholic beverage, racial disturbances, atomic dangers, a cold war, strained relations with national allies, frequent strikes, and many other problems.

The prophets of the Old Testament times used such crises as golden opportunities to point people back to GOD and to interpret his holy will.

A Prophet's Purpose in Preaching during a National Crisis

True prophets have a profound conviction that GOD on his throne is sovereign, overruling the sinful follies of men and determining the destinies of nations (Psalm 2). They seek to discern and interpret the purposes of GOD in allowing these crises to come. They are world statesmen and believe that godly people should be world citizens.

The prophets were patriots, but they were not narrow nationalists. All of the prophets of Israel believed that their nation was elected of GOD to be the benefactor to other nations, the spiritual teacher, the harbinger of godliness and peace.

Is this not true of any nation which GOD allows to rise into world leadership? It does not take profound scholarship in history to see that such is true in the United States of America. One can see the events of history throughout the Christian era pointing like the finger of GOD to America. The movement of Christianity westward from Jerusalem rather than eastward, the defeat of the Saracens at Tours in A.D. 722, which prevented Western Europe - and consequently America - from becoming Mohammedan in religion and culture, the victory in the Revolutionary War, and the preservation of the Union, all were crises in which GOD seemed to be working toward some noble purpose for this nation.

Three destiny-determining events which transpired within less than a century seem to indicate what that purpose is.

- first, printing was discovered about A.D. 1450, and tradition says that the Bible was the first book to be printed;
- next, Columbus discovered the western world in 1492;
- then, the Reformation began to sweep Western Europe in 1517.

It seems as clear as sunshine that GOD was preparing Western Europe and the United States to send missionaries into all the world with the open Bible and religious freedom.

"Judge of the nations, spare us yet,
Lest we forget - lest we forget!"

- Rudyard Kipling

Prophetic preaching in Israel reached an exalted peak when the missionary message was proclaimed.

Isaiah declared that peace would come under the righteous rule of the Messiah, when "**the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea**" (Isaiah II :9). He pictured a glorious social order and spiritual life which his people would enjoy and through which they would bless the Gentiles (Isaiah II:1-10). This would be true because "**out of Zion should go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem**" (Isaiah 2:3). Is not the GOD of the nations giving to the United States of America that same missionary opportunity and consequent blessings now?

Tides That Undermine Can Be Swept Back

Another purpose of prophetic preaching in a time of national crisis is to sweep back the tides of immorality which undermine the foundations of personal character and national security.

Today's increasing crime rate, fearful rate of divorce, ravages of the liquor traffic, prevalence of juvenile delinquency, and the fearful growth of godless materialism all challenge God-called prophets to herald the truth of the righteousness of Almighty GOD. Following the world wars and other crises, this nation needs a prophet, or thousands of prophets, to lay firm foundations for a spiritual order of life, just as Ezekiel built for the Jews a new order of life after the old order was wrecked by the Babylonian invasion and seventy years of captivity.

FOR BIBLE STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Is the average college and seminary graduate likely to be so well trained that he can think deeply about national affairs? Can he preach on them with discernment, discretion, and helpfulness?
2. How can a preacher deal with a moral principle involved in some national crisis without "preaching politics"?
3. How can a preacher speak on a political or governmental crisis without violating the principle of separation of church and state?
4. Discuss what you consider the most dangerous trend in present-day national life, and suggest how prophets can help turn back the tide.
5. Discuss the saying of JESUS, "**Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's,**" in the light of the preaching by the prophets as discussed in this chapter.

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