




Editor's Note

I'd like to take this opportunity to wish all of our readers a blessed New Year in the Lord! I was reflecting upon the words that the apostle John was inspired to write in his first letter, admonishing us to abide in Him in view of His coming (1 Jn. 2:28), which he then calls a purifying hope (3:2,3). There's no list of things which must first take place, nor any reference to our seeing the Lord at the moment of death, which is true. The hope set before

the believer is the coming of the Lord. Perhaps this year...

On another note, I hope you are enjoying the series of articles lately. Dr. Spender's helpful overview of the Old Testament books; Marti Miller's delightful lessons on the Journey of Faith, and my own suggestions about keeping fellowship in church groups in balance. We'll try not to overdo the series idea, but for now it seems to work out that way. 

Biblical Foundations

The Old Testament Prophets *by Robert Spender*

Introducing the Prophets: Eighth century BC Prophets of Israel

If people really knew the future they could gain vast riches just by investing in the stock market. In reality, we cannot predict the future, which is why the Lord provides insight through His word, especially about our eternal destiny. The OT prophets were complex individuals, yet the Lord called each one into His service. Primarily, prophets repeated earlier truths to bring people back to the Lord but on occasion they revealed the future. Their negative messages issued warnings while their positive revelations provided avenues of hope and windows into the Lord's ways. Rather than studying the Major and Minor Prophets as groups, our study will arrange them chronologically and geographically in order to better relate them to the periods of Israel's history. Time invested in the study of these insightful books will provide abundant spiritual riches. We'll begin with the 8th century BC prophets.

Hosea, Prophet of Love

Marriage is the Lord's plan for a man and woman as "one flesh" from creation to the present (Gen. 2:24). The Lord's use of marriage and family in Hosea comes as no surprise, but His instructions for Hosea to marry a harlot (Gomer) raises more than a few eyebrows. The imagery, however, graphically reflects Israel's position before the Lord. Gomer's waywardness and questionable offspring placard Israel's apostasy. But Hosea is about love and grace, so the restoration of Gomer and the changing of the children's names outshine the sordid beginning. God's love (related to the theme of the knowledge of God in Hosea) perseveres just as His grace reaches out to any who will come.

Hosea, a native of the Northern Kingdom, warned his people of pending destruction because of their idolatry and crass attitude to-

ward the Lord. Israel had substituted an empty ceremonialism for the loyal obedience sought by the Lord (Hosea 6:6, Matt. 9:13). Destruction of Israel by Assyria did come in 722 BC, but Hosea also spoke of future restoration, portraying the love and mercy of the Lord, powerful enough to reach beyond the grave (13:14, cf. 1 Cor. 15:55). To that end Hosea even foresaw Israel's return to a Davidic King, a veiled reference to the coming Messiah (3:5).

One amazing image of God's love can be found in His ability to lift the burden from their necks, and the moving description that "he bent down and fed them" (11:4). And while that may be a fuzzy reference to the wilderness manna, the picture comes into focus with the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The Lord's bending down for us moved Him all the way to the cross. Hosea's restoration of his wayward wife to her former position reflects his love for her, but how much more does Christ's descent to the cross reveal the love of our Lord for us!

Amos, Prophet of Justice

Prophets were real people, so they differ one from another. As today, the Lord works through real individuals with very different abilities. Amos' literary skill shines from the beginning as he draws a rhetorical noose around Israel.

Rebukes poured out upon antagonistic neighboring nations would have been well received by the people until Amos finally worked them into the center of God's judgment (2:6). Quickly departing from harsh words about neighboring nations, the rest of the book develops the guilt and responsibility of Israel. The prophet decries the superficial nature of Israel's ceremonialism (5:21-24). His concern for the treatment of marginalized people provided one indication of the people's

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Problem Solving

Keep Your Balance in the Quest for Fellowship, Part 2 by Jack Spender

We have been thinking about the need for balance in groups that strengthen fellowship (relationships) within a local church. Last time, we started to think about leadership within groups. Without good leadership, groups can become unprofitable as people with private agendas or a need to talk take control. So a good leader will neither dominate nor be overly passive, standing by while problems go unaddressed. Rather, he will strive for a good balance of submission to the Lord and the elders on one hand, while providing firm and gentle guidance for the group on the other. Once leaders are identified, we need to know how they will function, and how they will receive ongoing support and training.

2) How Group Leaders Function

At this point, some elders become nervous about handing over authority to younger men, or the danger of complex programs in the church. These concerns become groundless if one thing is kept in mind: leaders are delegated assistants who serve the Lord by freeing up the elders to stick with their priorities! As such, they need a clear vision of what their service is and open channels of communication to keep on course.

They can be given work on the “lighter side” to care for simple administrative tasks like starting the meetings in prayer and sharing announcements before the group does its work, or they can lead through a predetermined meeting agenda. Regardless of the degree of their responsibilities, they are not just “doing their own thing,” they serve as the Spirit leads by what they hear from those they assist: the elders. Thus, everything depends on clear communication.

Some churches handle this by making sure there is an elder in every group. But as the work grows, that can become impracticable, and at some point there

needs to be an element of trust. Elders who are secure in their relationship with delegated servants like deacons or group leaders should enjoy the freedom to attend to their own essential spiritual priorities, like time in the Word and prayer, visiting the saints, and preparing materials to equip younger disciples.

The general guideline for group leader function is: “We’re looking for enough structure to keep things edifying, and giving you enough flexibility to keep things interesting.” If something isn’t working, admit it and work together to correct it. Leaders must listen to the people in the group. People can be very forgiving if they have hope, if they sense that change isn’t a bad word, and if they feel that traditions are not more

important than people.

Contrary to the objection that planning quenches the leading of the Spirit, it must be affirmed that delegating responsibility to younger men is a Spirit-inspired part of Scripture throughout. A study of Exodus 18 and Acts 6, for example, will be helpful. How all of this is maintained and safeguarded leads us to the third and very important subject of ongoing support and training.

3) Support and Training

The support and training of group leaders is based on two important facts: problems are inevitable wherever there are people, and less experienced believers do not become more experienced automatically. Many Scriptures teach these truths. The Lord’s great commission gave instructions that disciples must be taught or trained to be obedient to His commands and they could count on His support (Matt. 28:20). Paul outlined this to the fourth generation in his famous instruction to Timothy (2 Tim. 2:2).

Accepting this, it follows that the greater the responsibility that is delegated to others, the more deeply will they need support from those who appointed them, and this calls for ongoing training and equipping.

A more extended treatment might cover these words separately, but for our purposes, we can study them together. Support focuses on the present, i.e., where we are right now, and the assurance that I have others behind me, backing me up and reassuring me. Training focuses on the future, i.e., where we need to go, and how to overcome the obstacles that stand in the way. Here are a few brief guidelines:

- Elders must communicate clearly to the congregation that leaders are not self-appointed. They are delegated. As such, it is reasonable to ask the people to honor them, cooperate with them, and pray for them. Repeating this from time to time is wise.
- Meetings of the elders with those they appoint should provide a pattern for group meetings in the church. It can be rewarding to follow a simple plan. In this area we use the letters LLDD as a general guideline:

Love inquires about the leader, his walk with the Lord, his marriage, health, his workload.

Learn shares insight from Scripture to teach sound doctrine and answer practical questions.

Decide makes certain that group needs (or needs of the church) are being addressed, not just talked about.

Do provides a gentle accountability for those who commit to serve in some way.

Whatever plan is adopted, it is important that fellowship touch the whole person, not just the mind. Bible studies must never become smokescreens to hide real-life opportunities

for growth. And flexibility is important. Not every aspect can be covered

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every time. It is good to depend on the Spirit of God to lead in revealing and meeting needs.

- Where there is blessing, there will be warfare! Through open communication, personal observation, and interaction with the saints, the elders will discern obstacles in the work. Facing and addressing these is a

critical part of support and training, and they provide fruitful topics for Scripture-based discussions in leader meetings.

Elders who ask, “So what’s going on in your group?” are admitting that they don’t know. How then can they provide help for their leaders, and so equip them

to lead more effectively? Resources are available and abundant, but as the saying goes, “Admitting there’s a problem is 51% of the solution.” If younger believers feel supported and see attempts to provide equipping, they will likely display a heartwarming commitment to the Lord and the assembly!

To be continued next issue.



Prophets (continued from page 1)

disobedience to God’s requirements (5:12) while his messages of woe listed crimes that evidenced their rebellious attitude (2:6-8).

Amos should stir our hearts to recognize that while we are not “of the world,” the Lord left us “in the world” (Jn. 17:15) to be His witnesses and to evidence His mercy, love, and grace to others. Israel was so caught up in the prosperity of the first half of the 8th century that the people were blind to the warning signs of imminent destruction.

After calling the people to seek the Lord in order to avoid disaster (Amos 5:4, 6, 14) Amos moved toward a series of five visions of judgment that include an illustration of how graciously the Lord worked with His servant. Amos so strenuously objected to the first two judgments that the Lord “changed His mind” about them (7:3, 6). The third vision revealed the people’s crookedness and was reinforced by Amos’ direct encounter with Amaziah, a priest of Israel who wanted to deport God’s prophet to his home in Judah. After being educated by the Lord about Israel’s condition Amos raised no further objections to coming judgment.

His encounter reminds us that when we are open to the leading of the Spirit, the Lord will move us both to do His will and to appreciate His ways.

Amos ends on a positive note of restoration. After a brief reminder of the Lord’s work with the nations (9:7) his focus moved to Israel’s role in bringing forth the Messiah (v. 11). The fall of the house of David (Judah, after Israel) would be cataclysmic, but its restoration would be much greater. The future Messiah would come from the restored nation and—beyond all imagination—would provide access for the Gentiles

(Acts 15:16-19), stretching to our present generation.

Jonah, Prophet of Mercy

Important for understanding the book of Jonah is the realization that Jonah’s message was ultimately written for Israel and Judah and, through the Spirit, to us.

Jonah was an 8th century prophet from the Northern Kingdom (2 Kings 14:25) to Nineveh but his book was written for the Lord’s people. In short, Nineveh got the prophet but Israel got the book. Jonah being swallowed by a great

fish is perhaps one of the best-known stories from the OT. Few people, however, know the developed context and, admittedly, the story line is sensational.

The first chapter sets the stage by showing the Lord’s sovereignty over creation very much in concert with the opening chapters of Genesis. God the creator is God the controller. Individuals who knew and accepted Jonah should have readily accepted Jesus’ miracles, which is why He referenced His own resurrection to Jonah’s miraculous deliverance (Matt. 12:40). The spellbinding story of how God’s runaway prophet was halted in his tracks is fraught with irony. We see, for example, the pagan captain telling Jonah to pray and the sailors sparing no effort to save Jonah who was avoiding God’s mission of mercy.

The quick-paced narrative slows with Jonah’s prayer, a poem in the midst of prose. Jonah’s prayer not only reveals his awakening to God’s greater work, it also provides a key message of the book. Jonah realized that people who were clinging to their worthless idols could

never find the Lord (Jonah 2:8). Someone needed to pry their attention away from a worldly captivation in order to see the Lord.

Belligerently, Jonah accepted the Lord’s mission and brought revival to Nineveh, providing us with a wonderful affirmation of God’s concern for the nations in anticipation of their acceptance through Christ (Eph. 2:13). But we also witness the grace of the Lord in working with Jonah. Object lessons and questions further reveal the patience of the Lord

towards His stubborn prophet and provide a telling example of how the Lord will not let us go. Jonah knew the Lord quite well, but applied that knowledge in the wrong direction (Jonah 4:2). As believers our job is to both know the

word (2 Tim. 2:15) and to allow the Spirit liberty to develop God’s plan *through* us, not *despite* us. Remember, when we decline any opportunity to serve the Lord we lose the blessing, because the Lord will always accomplish His plan.

The Message of Israel’s Prophets for Today

These 8th century prophets of Israel attest to the grace and mercy of the Lord toward Israel and graphically portray how the Lord patiently shapes His servants to bring about His desired goals. Hosea presents to us the depths of God’s love for His people while Amos reminds us of our broader responsibility in ministering to others as we share the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jonah, the runaway, illustrates the breadth of God’s mercy in bringing sinners to Himself and securing their future.



Wives' Corner

The Journey of Faith: Hannah *by Marti Miller*

What are the circumstances of your life that drive you to your knees? Often times we fail to see that the very things that cause us concern are the things that God would use to align our thoughts, lives, and prayers with His will. I believe this is the case with Hannah and I would like to take a curious look at the circumstances that molded her prayers.

Hannah was deeply tried, provoked often, and misunderstood, yet she sought the Lord and poured out her heart to Him. Would He hear and understand her dilemma? Being one of two wives belonging to Elkanah was so very hard, even though she knew her husband loved her dearly (1 Sam. 1:5).

For years, "her rival [Peninnah] provoked her severely, because the Lord had closed her womb" (1 Sam. 1:6,7). Imagine Hannah, watching the loving interaction of Peninnah and her children each day and longing so very much to have her own children, yet remaining barren. Yearly, the family went to the temple to make their sacrifices and Peninnah would make it her mission to provoke Hannah over her barrenness. Elkanah wanted to be enough for Hannah and did what he could to make her feel loved. But the heart of a barren woman who longs to hold a child is so grievous. Surely she petitioned the Lord each year and each year

felt the sorrow of continued barrenness. No wonder she didn't want to eat or join in the sacrificial meal (1 Sam. 1:8).

Hannah's story begins with the insightful interjection, "This man [Elkanah] went up from his city yearly to worship and sacrifice to the Lord of hosts in Shiloh. Also the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, the priests of the Lord, were there" (1 Sam. 1:3). We learn in the next chapter that Eli's sons were sinful, vile men, even in their supposed service to the Lord. "Now the sons of Eli were corrupt; they did not know the Lord" (1 Sam. 2:12). It would seem that each year as Elkanah and his two wives went up to sacrifice that they saw Eli's sons taking the sacrifices for themselves and lying with women at the gates. What a shame and sin against the Lord and His people! "Therefore the sin of the young men was very great before the Lord, for men abhorred the offering of the Lord" (1 Sam. 2:17).


Could it be that the Lord withheld children from Hannah and caused her to see these vile men each year to transform

her longing and prayer for a child into a son—a God-fearing son? Her cry to God was, "O Lord of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but will give Your maidservant a male child, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor shall come upon his head" (1 Sam. 1:11). Did she cry out for a son to give back to the Lord because the nation needed a God-fearing representative as much or more than she needed a child?

Her prayer was transformed through time and suffering and her final request was answered with Samuel.

Be encouraged and encourage others with Hannah's song of praise in 1 Sam. 2. The barren, the hungry, the poor, the needy and suffering all find their help in this One

who "will guard the feet of his faithful servants" (1 Sam. 2:9).

Keep on, dear sisters. May our hope always rest in the Lord. "Rejoicing in hope, be patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer" (Rom. 12:12). 

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