

“The Major Prophets”

Isaiah-Daniel; Isaiah 11:1-10 ¹

The fourth and fifth sections of the Old Testament are known as “the Major Prophets” and “the Minor Prophets,” with the Major Prophets being so designated primarily because their writings are considerably longer than those of the Minor Prophets. While Lamentations is an obvious exception to such length, it’s included among the Major Prophets chiefly because Jeremiah was likely its author.

There are five major prophetic books and twelve minor ones, and taken together, they comprise twenty-nine percent of the Old Testament and twenty-two percent of the Bible as a whole. This is really rather remarkable, since this means that nearly a third of the Hebrew Scriptures and nearly a quarter of the Bible as a whole represents God’s repeated, concerted, passionate, and persistent call to Israel to repent, thus averting the destruction that could finally be forestalled no longer. The prophetic books preserve in written form for future generations the reasons why Israel’s history unfolded as it did.

While we often think of prophecy as foretelling the future—and that is certainly a valid understanding—the prophets were actually far more concerned with calling their contemporaries back to their faithful covenant relationship with God than they were with predicting the future.

You may have heard a statement about prophets that goes something like this: “Those who act as prophets may expect a prophet’s reward.” Most of the prophets received cool responses from those to whom their messages were delivered. Sometimes the response was simply to ignore the prophet’s message, but prophets were often persecuted, imprisoned, and sometimes killed. Tradition has it, for example, that Isaiah and Jeremiah were both sawn in two.²

Several of the books of the prophets, notably Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, lack a central narrative and are best understood as anthologies or collections of various documents that include sermons, extended poems, visionary experiences, and dialogues between God and the prophets. The general movement in most of the books is from judgment to redemption, from bad news to good news. If you’ll keep the following five things in mind, you’ll be able to grasp the central thrust of this significant segment of Scripture:

1. The prophets firmly **asserted** that God was speaking through them.
2. The prophets repeatedly **affirmed** that God had chosen Israel for covenant relationship.
3. The prophets sadly **reported** that the majority of Israel had sinned against God and that special covenant relationship.
4. The prophets passionately **warned** of God’s purifying judgment.
5. The prophets consistently **promised** that God would bring renewal and Hope on the other side of judgment.³

With this brief introduction, then, let’s look at the five Major Prophets

¹ A sermon by David C. Stancil, Ph.D., delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on July 14, 2013.

² See *Lives of the Prophets* 1.1 and *Martyrdom of Isaiah* 5.1-14.

³ *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), pp. 1230-1231.

ISAIAH

Isaiah was a prophet to the southern kingdom of Judah during the last days of the northern kingdom of Israel before its destruction in 722 B.C. While Isaiah's primary message had to do with rebellion, repentance, and restoration, Isaiah's prophecies also included more references to God's coming Messiah than any other book of the Old Testament (25).

Whereas Jeremiah recorded vivid descriptions of his wrestling with God's call and message, the only real glimpse we get into Isaiah's inner life and response to God comes in Isaiah's record of God's commission to prophetic ministry that came to him in the famous Temple Vision of chapter 6.

The very first verse of this very first of the prophetic books tells us that it is *the record of the vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah*, alerting us to the fact that much of the prophetic experience had to do with dreams, visions, and altered states of consciousness through which God revealed the divine message to the prophets. This means that much of these prophetic writings is symbolic, not literal, and proper understanding of the prophets' message requires careful attention to how the original recipients would have understood those symbols.

Although Isaiah's prophecy is long, its general trajectory of rebellion, repentance, and restoration can be seen in its first few verses:

- A. *Woe to the sinful nation, a people whose guilt is great, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him (1:4).*
- B. *"Come now, let us settle the matter," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool" (1:18).*
- C. *In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it (2:2).*

I'll return briefly to Isaiah at the end of this morning's survey, but for now I'll just introduce Isaiah's prophecies of the coming Messiah, first with the beginning verses of our text that was read earlier, and then with the first of the four Servant Songs in which Isaiah gives a lot of information about the coming Messianic King:

Isaiah 11:1-2

- ¹ *A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.*
- ² *The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him— the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD.*

Isaiah 42:1-4 First Servant Song

- ¹ *"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations. ² He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. ³ A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; ⁴ he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his teaching the islands will put their hope."*

JEREMIAH

Jeremiah's ministry began nearly a century after the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel and continued through the destruction of the southern kingdom of Judah. God called Jeremiah into prophetic ministry while he was still quite young, and that work continued for forty years.

Jeremiah had a difficult life. His messages of repentance were not well received (7:1–8:3; 26:1–11). The citizens of his hometown plotted to kill him (11:18–23), and he endured a great deal of persecution in the pursuit of his ministry (20:1–6; 37:11–38:13; 43:1–7). So far as we know, only two people ever responded favorably to Jeremiah's preaching.⁴ It was a hard life, indeed.

Many have called Jeremiah "the weeping prophet," and while he does occasionally weep for Israel's condition (8:18–9:3; 13:15–17), this emphasis on Jeremiah's weeping is misleading with respect to Jeremiah's toughness and chutzpah. Jeremiah was a determined, dedicated, and visionary follower of God whose courage and stamina served as examples for the apostle Paul (see 2 Corinthians 3), who was nobody's wimp. Perhaps Jeremiah would be more accurately called "the persevering prophet."⁵

Unlike the famous jingle, "When E.F. Hutton talks, people listen," when Jeremiah talked, nobody listened. Although Jeremiah was frequently persecuted, he was also frequently ignored, and his writings contain long recitations of mournful complaints that have given us the word, "jeremiad" to describe them.

It may be helpful to think of the book of Jeremiah as a notebook or scrapbook of things written by the prophet across the years of his ministry. While Jeremiah included enough "news clippings" to piece together the story of his life, his key writings are the prophetic poems he wrote to address the spiritual needs of his generation and to call his people to repentance.⁶ Here are some of those clippings:

Jeremiah 2:13

¹³ *"My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.*

Like Isaiah and the prophets in general, Jeremiah's ministry began by confronting Judah with their foolishness and sin in abandoning God.

Jeremiah 4:19

¹⁹ *Oh, my anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain. Oh, the agony of my heart! My heart pounds within me, I cannot keep silent. For I have heard the sound of the trumpet; I have heard the battle cry.*

Jeremiah 8:20-9:1

²⁰ *"The harvest is past, the summer has ended, and we are not saved."* ²¹ *Since my people are crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me.* ²² *Is there no balm in Gilead?*

Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?

¹ *Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people.*

⁴ Jeremiah apparently had only two converts: Baruch, his scribe (32:12; 36:1–4; 45:1–5), and Ebed-melech, an Ethiopian eunuch who served the king (38:7–13; 39:15–18).

⁵ ESV, pp. 1363-1364.

⁶ ESV, p. 1367.

These passages are the primary source of Jeremiah's nickname, "the weeping prophet."

Jeremiah 29:11-13

¹¹ *For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. ¹² Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.*

This is one of the better-known promises of restoration and hope in Jeremiah. It is a favorite verse for many.

Jeremiah 31:31-34

³¹ *"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD.*

³³ *"This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ³⁴ No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."*

One of the most important insights in Jeremiah is this prophecy that mentions "a new covenant." This is one of the clearest predictions of the sixth covenant in the Bible, the covenant that came through Jesus. (The other covenants were with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David.)

LAMENTATIONS

The short book of Lamentations is a collection of laments, or melancholy dirges, for a ruined society. The occasion for these laments was Babylon's destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C., and Lamentations was likely written not long afterward, probably by Jeremiah. The book is composed of five interconnected poems, most likely intended to be prayed or sung in worship services devoted to asking God's forgiveness and seeking restoration to a covenant relationship with God.⁷

The five poems in Lamentations are elegies or funeral orations in which the author expresses deep personal and communal grief for the dead and for all of the suffering that surrounds the destruction of Jerusalem. The first four poems are acrostics⁸ that use the entire Hebrew alphabet, offering a lament "from A to Z" (or *aleph* to *taw*). Perhaps the highly structured form of the acrostic is also an attempt to impose some sense of order on a tragic situation that is chaotic beyond what anyone can bear.⁹

I've selected four short passages from Lamentations. The first two illustrate the despair that fills these dirges, while the last two illustrate the Hope that illumines that same darkness:

Lamentations 1:12

¹² *"Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look around and see. Is any suffering like my suffering that was inflicted on me, that the LORD brought on me in the day of his fierce anger?"*

⁷ ESV, p. 1476.

⁸ There are other acrostic poems in the Bible, the best-known of which is Psalm 119.

⁹ ESV, pp. 1476-1477.

Lamentations 2:11

¹¹ *My eyes fail from weeping, I am in torment within; my heart is poured out on the ground because my people are destroyed*

Lamentations 3:21-26

²¹ *Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: ²² Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. ²³ They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ²⁴ I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him." ²⁵ The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; ²⁶ it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.*

Lamentations 3:31-32

³¹ *For no one is cast off by the Lord forever. ³² Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love.*

EZEKIEL

Ezekiel and Daniel are the only two prophets who wrote from Babylon during the time of Israel's exile there.¹⁰ Both books feature some pretty strange visions in which God's message is presented in symbolic ways that sometimes made no sense even to the prophets themselves . . . so we shouldn't become discouraged when they're difficult for us, too.

Like Isaiah, Ezekiel tells us in the very first verse that this is going to be the record of his visions, and some of them are truly weird. The opening vision is the source of William Dawson's famous spiritual, "*Ezekiel Saw the Wheel*, way up in the middle of the air,"¹¹ and things just get weirder from there.

It's in Ezekiel that we first experience a vision of heavenly things revealed through a celestial guide, a guide who appears again in Daniel, in Zechariah, and in John's Revelation in the New Testament. And it's in Ezekiel, too, that we experience "the Valley of the Dry Bones" (chapter 37), from which we get another familiar spiritual, this one from James Weldon Johnson.¹²

Ezekiel's preaching made frequent use of what some have euphemistically called "street theater,"¹³ and what most of us would just call bizarre behavior. Even so, Ezekiel brought a clear message of the sovereignty of Israel's God over all the nations, and his messages about "the good shepherd" (34:11-24), "the river of living water" (47:1-14), and future resurrection (37:12-13) became significant themes in the New Testament.

The two short texts I've chosen from Ezekiel highlight one of the central themes in all of the prophetic books—God's plea for the people's repentance so that judgment might be averted:

Ezekiel 22:30

³⁰ *"I looked for someone among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found no one.*

¹⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_the_Hebrew_prophets

¹¹ **William Levi Dawson** (September 26, 1899 – May 2, 1990) was an African-American composer, choir director and professor.

¹² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Weldon_Johnson

¹³ ESV, p. 1497.

Ezekiel 33:11

¹¹ *Say to them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?'*

DANIEL

Like Ezekiel, Daniel was among those Jews deported to Babylon, but unlike Ezekiel, Daniel rose to the center of power in the empire, and it is that very prominence that forms the backdrop of the well-known stories of “the Daniel diet” (1:1-21), Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the Great Statue (2:1-49), “the fiery furnace” (3:1-30), “the handwriting on the wall” (5:1-31), and “Daniel and the Den of Lions” (6:1-28). Like Ezekiel, the central theme of Daniel is God’s sovereignty over all the earth and all of earth’s history.

Chapters 7-12 of Daniel are the Old Testament equivalent of the book of Revelation in the New Testament. They record highly symbolic apocalyptic visions that portray vast stretches of political and spiritual history, and they, too, include themes that we’ll see again in Revelation. The passage I’ve chosen to highlight, for example, is very similar to the picture of the Risen Christ we see in Revelation 1:12-16:

Daniel 7:9-14

⁹ *“As I looked, “thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze. ¹⁰ A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated, and the books were opened. ¹¹ “Then I continued to watch because of the boastful words the horn was speaking. I kept looking until the beast was slain and its body destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire. ¹² (The other beasts had been stripped of their authority, but were allowed to live for a period of time.)*

¹³ *“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence.*

¹⁴ *He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.*

Homily

As we draw this morning’s overview toward a close, I want to return to a few of Isaiah’s statements about our own desperate need for a Savior and about God’s provision for our need:

Isaiah 59:1-2

¹ *Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear.*

² *But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.*

Isaiah 64:6

⁶ *All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.*

Isaiah 1:18

¹⁸ *“Come now, let us settle the matter,” says the LORD. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.*

Isaiah 9:6-7

⁶ For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷ Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

Isaiah 53:4-6

⁴ Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Thank you, Lord, for this grace that is greater than our Sin!