

- **\*READ Romans 15:4-6\*** Paul follows up his teachings on how brethren ought to deal with one another's opinions and consciences by further instructing the strong brethren to be patient with those who are weak because we are to look out for the best for others and strive to build them up. He gives evidence for these instructions by quoting from the Old Testament text of **Psalm 69:9** which is a Messianic psalm that states, *"The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me."* From here, Paul reminds the reader that all of those older writings were written for the instruction of the disciple of Jesus so that we might gain hope, endurance, and encouragement from the Scriptures.
- I would say that many, if not all of us, would give a hearty "amen" to Paul's statement because we easily see the value that is found in reading and knowing the Old Testament writings. We appreciate the Pentateuch because it tells us the origins of mankind and God's great promises to us through Abraham. We find value in the books of history because they teach us practical lessons about life through the successes and failures of many Biblical characters. We even love the writings of poetry because we can relate to the real emotion that jumps off so many of the pages. But then we get to the Prophets and our appreciation lessens, or at least that has been true of myself for much of my life.
- I would feel decently confident in saying that a solid percentage of Christians are at least somewhat intimidated by the writings of the Prophets, and I can understand why that is the case. Where as much of the Old Testament writings are either historical, narrative, or poetic in nature...the Prophets offer up a laundry lists of different literary styles and speech types. There are disputations, judgment speeches, promises of restoration and salvation, allegories, parables, legal language, biographies, and funeral speeches. (How To Read & Understand The Prophets, Gentry, pg. 13) Additionally, the Prophets are scattered throughout the history of divided Israel. Some are ministering to the northern kingdom and at the same time another is ministering to the southern kingdom. One prophet might be working in the cities among the people and another might be out in the wilderness proclaiming the will of God.
- All of these different varying elements are found with this single major section of the Old Testament, and we might find ourselves shying away from careful consideration of them because we simply don't know how to understand the message (if there is one!) they contain. In doing so, we fail to gain the hope, endurance, and encouragement that the writings of the Prophets offer up to us. Therefore, to hopefully encourage those who might be slightly intimidated by a Daily Bible Reading that goes through the writings of the Prophets, I'd like give a short introduction to the Prophets who in the simplest terms are mouthpieces for God. We'll consider some tips for reading the Prophets, the basic message of the Prophets, and then the value in our consideration of the Prophets.

## **I. Tips For Reading The Prophets:**

### **A. Begin by identifying the proper historical context to each writing.**

1. As with any Biblical writing, context is key, and when it comes to reading the Prophets identifying the historical context of the writing is of the extreme importance. Because these writings are separate from the historical timeline of the Old Testament narrative, it is very important for us to figure out when each prophet was speaking, where he was speaking, and to whom he was speaking. If you're a visual person like me, then finding a timeline or table that contains facts about the prophets is a good way to begin getting this information straightened out.
2. The Prophets can be divided up into two main groups and they are designated by whether or not they prophesied before or after exile.
  - a) Pre-exilic Prophets: Jonah, Hosea, Amos, Isaiah, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Ezekiel.
  - b) Post-exilic Prophets: Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.
  - c) Debated Prophets: Obadiah & Joel

3. Then we could also divide up the Prophets depending on whether or not they were sent to God's people or the nations around them. Jonah (Ninevah), Nahum (Assyria), and Obadiah (Edom) were all written to people outside of Israel with the rest focusing on the Northern & Southern kingdom of Israel & Judah.
  4. Once we figure out the when, where, and whom then we can begin to better understand the message of each prophet and what is meant by their prophetic messages.
- B. Remember that the writings of the Prophets were not only foretellings of the future, but they were also forthtellings of present conditions.**
1. When we hear the word "prophet" we might initially think that everything said by the prophet is a foretelling of something that is coming in the future, but this simply isn't the case. To prophesy for God was to simply give God's divine perspective to the recipients of the message. These men were sent out to God's people and the surrounding nations to announce God's thoughts on the current climate of the world. Jonah's book shows this as being the case. There is no prophecy of the future outside of coming judgment if the Ninevites didn't repent.
  2. Of course, there were times when the prophets would prophesy concerning things that would happen in the future. Some of the most famous prophecies would include **Isaiah 53, Daniel 2, & Daniel 9** just to name a couple.
- C. Read the writings of the Prophets with Deuteronomy in mind.**
1. Much of the message of the prophets who were sent to God's people centers around them accusing the people of being unfaithful to God's covenant that He had made with them on Mount Sinai. If we remember, Deuteronomy is Moses's farewell message to the people of Israel after they had wandered for 40 years in the wilderness waiting for God to let them into the Promised land. It is during the first section of this writing, which serves as a spiritual pep talk to Israel, that Moses challenges the people to be different than their parents and remain obedient to God (chapters 1-11). Moses then goes on (chapters 12-26) to rehash the covenant with the people so that they would be refreshed on what God expected from them from a societal and religious perspective. It is in this section that Moses hands down the ultimatums of the blessings or cursings. If they did what was right, they would be blessed, but their disobedience would lead to a cursing and punishment (famines, plagues, exiles). The final section (chapters 27-34) contains Moses simply laying down the choices. They could either choose life or death, but Moses actually predicts their failures because of their hard and selfish hearts. He knew they would reject God and be punished for it, but he also writes of a future restoration that would come upon the people through great transformation.
  2. So what does this have to do with the writings of the Prophets? It has everything to do with the prophets because the Prophets are often accusing God's people of being covenant breakers. Instead of them being faithful to the covenant of Moses and its ordinances, they often went after other God's and rejected God's will. What we see in the writings of the Prophets are the words of Moses coming to fruition many centuries after his death. The same things that Moses emphasized to the people in Deuteronomy were the same things the people of God failed to do which would eventually lead them to exile from the promised land. But just as Moses spoke of future restoration...so do the prophets offer such hope.
- D. Be patient and be willing to do some real digging and study in order to make best sense of the writings.**
1. We should not expect to be unfamiliar with the writings of the Prophets and be able to read through once and have a firm grasp on what is being said. We shouldn't expect to fully understand the meaning of Jeremiah hiding his undergarments under a rock (**Jeremiah 13:1-7**), Isaiah walking around naked for three years (**Isaiah 20:1-3**), or Ezekiel cutting off his hair, burning some, striking some with a sword, and throwing the rest into the wind. (**Ezekiel 5:1-4**)

2. Therefore, we must not get frustrated when becoming confused or not clearly understanding what you have read. Instead, maybe jot down a few notes and ideas, read through the text again, and maybe even consult some thoughts given by other people in books or commentaries. This sounds like work, and it is, but it is fulfilling work that will help greatly in our understanding of this often overlooked section of God's Word.

## II. Standard Message Of The Prophets:

- Isaiah is seen by many as being a pretty accurate representation of what can be expected from those Prophetic writings that are standard in nature. Those similar writings contain a pretty standard message that flows through their pages, and we'll quickly look at how this standard message is seen in Isaiah.
- A. The people of God or of the nations are guilty of rebelling against God.
  - Judah is accused of rebellion against God. (**Isaiah 1:2-4**)
  - Their rebellion had caused God to not accept their covenant worship. (**1:10-15**)
  - The leaders were guilty of devastating God's vineyard. (**3:13-15**)
  - These three text show the often emphasized shortcomings of God's people. They broke the covenant, took advantage of the weak, and participated in idolatry by going after other gods.
- B. If they repented, they would be spared of God's punishment for their sin.
  - If they were willing to repent & become obedient then they would have life & blessings. (**1:16-19**)
- C. If they refused to repent, they would be punished by God for their sin.
  1. Refusal of God and rebellion would only lead to destruction. (**1:20-31**)
- D. A future restoration was possible through future repentance.
  - For Judah, they would be delivered from the hand of Assyria because they would learn to trust in God instead of self. (**10:20-26**)
- E. Ultimate restoration for all nations would come through the Messiah.
  - Nearly the entire second half of Isaiah's book focuses on the future ultimate restoration of God's people and the people of the nations through Jesus. Again, **Isaiah 53** is most famous for its focus on the sufferings of God's Servant on behalf of the true sinners, but even before this in **Isaiah 2:1-5** we read of the coming day when the mountain of the Lord's house would be established and all nations would flow into it. Sprinkled all throughout Isaiah are different passages that focus on coming of God's Messiah and the good He would do.
  - We have only looked at the standard message of Isaiah, but a similar message is found in nearly all of the Prophetic writings that close out our Old Testaments. As we're reading through the work of each prophet, let's see if we can identify this patterns and make special note of it.

## III. The Value Of The Prophets To The Disciple Of Jesus Christ:

- A. The Prophets remind us of how seriously God takes the covenants He has made with His people.
  1. While we certainly see this serious reality in Isaiah, no prophet quite illustrates just how true this is like Hosea. This prophet was instructed by God to go marry a woman (Gomer) who he surely knew would be unfaithful to him. He even had children with this woman, and their names Lo-ruhamah (no compassion) and Lo-ammi (not my people) symbolized the strained relationship between God and His people. Gomer surely does become unfaithful to Hosea, but God demands that he go and reconcile with her even though she continued to be with another man.
  2. Why would God cause His prophet to endure such a thing? It was to show to him and all who read his writing that God takes His covenants with His people seriously, and even if we violate them...He still desires for us to repent and He is willing to take us back. This same truth is true for us as disciples of Jesus. We have entered into a covenant relationship with Jesus through our obedience to the Gospel (**Galatians 3:27-29**). Our breaking of that covenant pains God, but He

still desires reconciliation if we will repent. When we read writings such as Hosea and other prophets, we are only reminded of the seriousness of this covenant we have with God and how much we should value and protect it.

**B. We are impressed with the fact that God is active among the kingdoms of men in order to fulfill His purposes.**

1. This is seen throughout the writings of the prophets as God uses the nations around Israel and Judah to execute judgements against them in order to bring about the punishment His people deserved because of their sins. But we see this stated most explicitly in Daniel's writings.
2. In **Daniel 4:1-17**, King Nebuchadnezzar has a dream of a massive and powerful tree that provided food and shelter for all around it. However, that tree was eventually cut down and destroyed. The watcher, a holy one who destroys the tree states, *"This word is by decree of the watchers, and the decision is by command from the holy ones. This is so that the living will know that the Most High is ruler over human kingdoms. He gives them to anyone he wants and sets the lowliest of people over them."* (**Daniel 4:17**) The message of the watcher is clear....God works in the kingdoms of men and does so for the purpose of bringing about His will. We might not be able to guarantee and be dogmatic that something within the world is being influenced by God in our day, but we cannot rule out the fact that something is influenced by Him and done to bring about His purposes. All we need to do is read through the Prophets and we will see God's ability and willingness to do so.

**C. We are encouraged to see God's faithfulness in making sure that His promises do come to pass.**

1. Staying in Daniel, let's consider that Daniel's prophecy given by God concerning Nebuchadnezzar surely does come to pass. **Daniel 4:19-37** explains the meaning of the dream and both the bad and the good portions coming to pass. Nebuchadnezzar does fall because of his pride, but he is eventually restored and he humbly praises God.
2. This single story is a microcosm of the story of God's covenant people of Israel. Their pride and arrogance led to their down fall, but their return to humility, trust, and faithfulness to God would eventually bring them back to the promised land. Their restoration would then eventually bring about the introduction of Jesus through whom the whole world would be blessed. The message of the Prophets is only another evidence from Scripture that God is faithful to fulfill His promises. I feel confident in saying that our consideration of the writings of the Prophets will only further solidify our confidence in God to bring about His great and magnificent promises to us.

Though the writings of the Prophets might be somewhat intimidating because of their uniqueness, I am confident that each of us will only be benefitted by spending time reading through them this year. I hope these tips can help your reading, and I hope that each of us will experience the benefits that come not only from simply being in God's Word more often, but that we will benefit specifically from being in the writings of the Prophets. May God bless all of us this year and even this week as we seek to be influenced and motivated to live godly in this ungodly world.