

# The March of Prophecy

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## I. FROM ADAM TO MOSES

In order for us to live with real meaning and to die with real peace we need not only a God who *exists*; we need a God who *has spoken*. The problem that immediately confronts us, however, is that God is a hidden God, who dwells in a light no one can approach. If we're ever to gain reliable information about who God is, and who we are, and what his plan for us is, and what we've done to mess up that plan, and what he has done to restore and renew his great good plan, we need outside help. We need for God to *reveal* himself (*re + velare*, literally, to "pull back the veil"), and to show us things we could never have found out by ourselves.

Ever since the fall all true religion is founded on special super-natural *revelation of God*. All other religion, which *originates in the mind of man*, is necessarily false. The intellect God gave us is simply not an adequate instrument for measuring God. Human intellect was limited before the fall; the damage inflicted by the fall has weakened it still more. St. Paul has this to say about the unregenerate: "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Co 2:14). Unless the Spirit of God illuminates our minds through the miracle we call conversion, you and I lack the yardstick we need to measure religious truth, to distinguish between what is true and what is false.

That's not the way it was with our first parents. When God created them, he made them in his image. Their intellect, their emotions and their will were in perfect sync with God. Adam and Eve instinctively knew everything they needed to know in order to live happy and meaningful and secure lives. They knew without being told that *they* had been created for *God*, not *he* for *them*. They knew they had been designed to live under him in a Lord-and-servant relationship, and they were happy with that arrangement. Nobody had to tell them that life works only one way — God's way — and they wouldn't have wanted it any other way.

There was no need for any human intermediary to convey the messages God had for Adam and Eve. God revealed directly to them everything about *himself* and everything about *themselves* they needed to know. The first prophetic revelation came directly from God. He created a physical world which declared his glory. He gave his children a lovely garden home which showed his love for two people whom he had made one and whom he commanded to rule the earth for him. We might wish we knew more about life in Eden before the fall, while Adam and Eve still lived in close communion with God. We wish we had records of those early conversations when God visited with them.

We'll probably not be far from the truth if we say that God's message to Adam and Eve was the twofold message of law and gospel. In Eden, however, the law served a different function for those two holy people than it now does for sinners. God's command not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil offered Adam and Eve the opportunity to exercise their free will, to choose to serve God. Luther says that tree (right in the middle of the garden, where they couldn't miss it) was "their church, their altar, their pulpit," where they could bring God the sacrifice of glad obedience. God's command offered those two perfect people the *opportunity to progress* from created innocence to conscious, self-chosen holiness. If they had obeyed God's command, they would have been confirmed in their holiness. They would have been raised to a state analogous to that of the good angels, who are confirmed in bliss. But that was not to be. Our first parents were not happy with what God told them. Instead they listened attentively when Satan suggested he could tell them more about *God* and about *themselves* and about true happiness in life.

You and I are children of Father Adam and Mother Eve. We'd like to know why God created the world just so and why he governs his world the way he does. If God were only to consult with us, we could show him

a better way to run his world. I have a hunch that, already as children, we advised God that if he hadn't put that tree in the garden he could have avoided a whole crockful of trouble, including the fall of the human race. Remember that the powers of human intellect were limited even *before* the fall (Adam and Eve were not omniscient). *After* the fall those powers were limited even more.

Adam is the first human being whom the Scripture records as having served a prophetic function. You will recall that God entered the garden to preach law to two guilty people, and to announce a new saving revelation. He informed his two children, who were still blushing from their first sin, the painful reminders they could now expect in their lives. God's so solemn revelation ended with the words: "Dust you are, and to dust you will return."

Now note Adam's immediate reaction to this double divine revelation. "Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living" (Gn 3:20). Adam gave his wife the name *Chavvah*, which means "living" or "life." With this name Adam proclaimed that through Eve God would restore life in its fullest sense to a world of death. Just as the Scripture often uses the term "death" to describe *separation from God*, so Adam here uses the term "life" in the sense of *union with God*. The name he gave his wife first of all showed his faith in God's promise to send a Champion to crush Satan. But with that name Adam also announced that his wife would be the ancestress of the Savior, who would restore life to a lost world.

That statement from the lips of Adam was the *first* prophetic declaration from the lips of a human being which is recorded on the pages of the Scripture. Our purpose on these five Monday afternoons will be to trace the *development* of prophecy from its beginning to its fulfillment. Down through the centuries the *content* of prophecy was always the same. God revealed the *terrible truth of sin*. He also revealed the *precious truth of how he would reverse the terrible consequences of sin*. In the course of the centuries God continued this twofold revelation in greater detail.

Again and again God chose certain persons, miraculously revealed his truth to them, and commanded them to transmit this revelation to his people. God did not see fit, once for all, to inundate his people with his sacred secrets. Instead he saw fit to share his plans for them in a way that corresponded to the particular situation in which they found themselves at the time, and in a measure they could comprehend. And since his people often opposed each new development in God's magnificent plan, God often had to revise his plan. His judgment of the *flood*, e.g., and of the judgment on the builders of the *tower of Babel* were necessitated by his people's stubborn rejection of his mercy. It wasn't God's original plan for his people to spend *forty years in the desert*, either, or to be led off into *exile*.

Unlike the arrangement God decreed when he instituted the *kingship* in Israel, there was no dynasty, no royal succession of *prophets*. God simply chose men and women here and there and spoke through them. This march of prophecy continued until the promised Seed of the woman appeared to fulfill all prophecy. The author of the epistle to the Hebrews summarizes this march of prophecy accurately: "in the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (He 1:1f).

It will come as no surprise to you to hear that this high view of prophecy as a supernatural phenomenon is not shared by all students of the Old Testament. Negative higher criticism, with its antisupernatural convictions and presuppositions, sees nothing miraculous in the work of Israel's prophets. According to the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, "when the prophet speaks that which he represents to be the Word of God, it is to him emphatically the Word of God. ... In the prophetic psyche this Word is initiated by God" (3:912). The theory has been advanced that the biblical prophets were *ecstatics*. "In their ecstatic frenzy ... the nervous and emotional excitement inhibited the ordinary control of the brain... The subject had visions and dreams ... In all parts of the world people in such paroxysms have been thought to be under the control of a supernatural being. ... The great majority of the prophetic oracles as we have them now are reports, possibly or even probably given by the prophets themselves of what they had heard in their ecstasy" (Heschel, *The Prophets* 345).

Since the historical-critical method of Bible interpretation rules out predictive prophecy, any prediction of the future must be regarded as the prophet's reflections of what *has already happened* or what the prophet himself logically *expects to happen*. Another thing. According to the negative critics, the prophets were not divinely sent messengers; they were social activists, *crusaders for social justice*. They did not write for *future* generations of God's people; they addressed only *contemporary* problems. "The prophet is always a man of his own time, and it is always to the people of his own time that he speaks, not to a generation long after, nor to us" (A.B. Davidson, quoted in Young, *My Servants the Prophets* 153).

Enough of this for now. When we discuss the phenomenon of predictive prophecy in the Scripture we'll have occasion to address the detractors once again. But surely we'll agree that it's not difficult to understand why the practitioners of the historical-critical method of Bible interpretation must say things like you just heard. Given their presuppositions (that the Old Testament is just a piece of Jewish national literature, not a supernaturally revealed document), how else could you explain the amazing messages which the prophets announced to the people of Israel and to her neighbors than by trying to find some rational explanation?

As the outline you have in your hands points out, we'll seek to trace the march of prophecy — the divinely inspired proclamation of law and gospel — from *Adam to Moses*, secondly *in the theocratic nation*, then *from exile to the fulfillment of prophecy in Christ*. We'll plan to spend one of our sessions reviewing *prophecy in the New Testament*. Our final session will be spent reviewing the basic hermeneutical *principles for interpreting the prophetic message*.

It's already been mentioned who the first human being was whom God used to communicate his saving message of law and gospel. It was Adam. On his way to being driven out of the garden, he called his wife "Eve," the one through whom life — real true life — would be restored to a world of people who were now subject to the deterioration and decay of sin and death.

Genesis 4 describes the two branches of Adam's and Eve's family. The bulk of the chapter gives us the disappointing history of the Cainite branch of the family. Cain's descendants followed their ancestor in unbelief. Although they enjoyed an advanced culture (some of the elements mentioned are skills in animal husbandry, metalworking, and music) yet it was a Cainite named Lamech (fifth generation down from Cain) who introduced polygamy into the human race. The first poetry recorded in the Scripture came from the lips of Lamech, and it breathes the spirit of defiance of God, and glorifies violence and bloodthirsty revenge.

In sharp contrast to the history of the Cainites stands the early history of the Sethite branch of Adam's family, recorded very briefly in the closing two verses of Genesis 4. Cultural development among the Sethites took an entirely different direction than it did among the Cainites. Genesis 4:26 tells us that at the time of Seth's son Enosh, men "began to call on the name of the LORD." It's significant that that name "LORD" is spelled with all capital letters, an indication that in the original the Tetragrammaton is used, the name *Yahweh*. That's God's covenant name, his OT Savior name. It's a name which describes him as the God of *absolute independence* and of *absolute constancy*. Incidentally, both KJV and NIV have an unsatisfactory rendering of the verb that describes this activity of the Sethites. In our English idiom, "calling on" the name of the LORD describes the activity of *praying*. Now surely that activity of God's believing children did not begin with the descendants of Seth. A footnote in the NIV offers what must surely be the correct translation. At the time of Seth's son Enosh men began to "*proclaim* the name of the LORD." This is prophetic activity, public proclamation of law and gospel. Within three generations the religion of the true God had developed into public worship. In sharpest contrast to the Cainites, whose lifestyle preached *self-glorification*, the worship of the Sethites glorified the free and faithful *love of the Savior*.

Subsequent generations of Sethites continued this prophetic ministry. The apostle Jude informs us that "Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied ... 'The Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones to judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly of all the ungodly acts they have done in the ungodly way, and of all the harsh words ungodly sinners have spoken against him' " (Jd 14f).

Enoch's grandson was Lamech, another important link in the blessed march of prophecy. Genesis 5:29 tells us that he named his newborn son Noah, explaining: "He will comfort us in the labor and painful toil of our

hands caused by the ground the LORD has cursed.” Some-how pious Lamech knew that the infant son he held in his arms was destined by God to be a comfort to the human race. We wonder: did father Lamech think his infant son was the promised Savior? That was Luther’s opinion. Or was he prophesying that through Noah God would bring deliverance and comfort to a godly remnant, a prophecy which came true at the time of the great flood?

We have it on the authority of St. Peter that Noah himself deserves to be listed among the prophets. In his second epistle St. Peter calls Noah “a preacher of righteousness” (2 Pt 2:5). During the years the ark was under construction, Noah preached with his saw and his hammer that God never designed man to live independently of him, and that he cannot and will not accept second place in any man’s life. Although Noah’s contemporaries before the flood scoffed at the building of the ark and thus rejected Noah’s preaching of the law, they heard the prophetic message that God means business when he says: “My glory I will not give to another.”

Noah preached law and gospel, however, not only with his hands but also with his lips. The best example we have of that takes us to the time after the flood. After Noah had dishonored himself and was in turn dishonored by his son Ham, he spoke one of the most remarkable prophecies in the entire OT. He prophesied the moral and spiritual history of the nations who would descend from his three sons.

“Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers” (Gn 9:25). Canaan was one of Ham’s sons, and in this young man Noah had observed a coarse sensuality which boded ill for his future. The tendency toward immorality which his father Ham had displayed would be more fully developed in Canaan and would find expression in the life of his descendants, who you remember were occupants of the promised land at the time of the Israelite invasion and conquest. God would withdraw the restraining activity of his Holy Spirit, so that Canaan’s tendency to immorality, therefore, went unchecked and resulted in one of the most sordid and degrading forms of idolatry.

From Noah’s prophecy we learn that God’s judgment on Canaan would take another form. “Cursed be Canaan! The *lowest of slaves* will he be to his brothers.” God would judge Canaan’s sin also by permitting his descendants to be sold into slavery — to his fellow Hamites, to the Shemites, and to the Japhethites. Noah showed himself to be a true prophet not only in *predicting* the awful future that awaited the Canaanites, but by *acquiescing* in that divine judgment. In recording Noah’s prophecy, the sacred writer first of all used the Hebrew *imperfect*, which describes an action not yet complete: “the lowest of slaves will he be” That’s a simple prediction. In describing Noah’s words, however, Moses also used the Hebrew *jussive*, a form of the verb in which the speaker injects his will into the action. Referring to Shem, Noah prophesied: “.., and let Canaan be his servant.” That’ not only *prediction* of what will be; that’s *acquiescence* in what God has determined. Like a true prophet, Noah concurred in God’s judgment on the sin of the Canaanites. The believer’s will agrees with God’s will even when he announces judgment.

After that sobering segment of his prophecy Noah burst out in a hymn of praise to Yahweh, God of Shem. By divine revelation Noah knew that Shem’s descendants would be the cradle of the Savior, and he praised God for fulfilling his promise to Shem.

The third segment of Noah’s prophecy brought good news for the Japhethites, those Gentile nations in countries north and west of the holy land. According to Noah, the Japhethites “would live in the tents of Shem.” They would share in the blessed inheritance God would give to Shem — the truth of God as we have it in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the long march of prophecy Noah occupies an illustrious place. He preached the law in a way that cut and hurt. One is reminded of Walther’s statement: “We must preach people into hell before we can preach them into heaven” (*Law and Gospel* 118). And Noah preached the gospel — not blandly and in generalities (what somebody has called “The Gospel According to Platitude”) but clearly and pointedly.

We don’t usually think of the patriarchs as prophets, and that’s *our* problem, because the OT does. Psalm 105:8-15 specifically names Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and says this about them: “God allowed no one to oppress them. For their sake he rebuked kings: Do not touch my anointed ones; do *my prophets* no harm.” “

In what way can Abraham, e.g., be considered a prophet? Well, in the first place God *revealed himself* to Abraham. Genesis 12:1ff tells us that the LORD spoke to him. He gave Abraham a command, but primarily a promise: “Leave your country, your people, and your father’s household. ... I will bless you, and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” A few chapters later on, the word of the LORD came to Abraham *in a vision* (15:1ff). To announce the birth of Isaac and to inform him of the disaster impending for Sodom and Gomorrah the LORD actually *appeared in visible form* to Abraham (17:1). Two generations later the patriarch Jacob informed his wives Rachel and Leah that God had spoken to him *in a dream* (31:11).

What was the patriarchal response to the divine revelation of law and gospel? This again deserves to be recognized as prophetic activity. At Shechem, in the dead center of the land, “Abraham *built an altar* to the LORD” (12:7). At Bethel, twenty-five miles south of Shechem, he built an altar to the LORD and *proclaimed the name of the LORD*” (12:8). Throughout the century Abraham spent in the promised land, on many occasions and in many places he testified publicly to the Savior God, who had revealed himself to him. Even when Abraham’s faith sagged, he did not lose his prophetic status and prerogative. When Abraham was in Philistine territory, e.g., his lie about Sarah’s being his sister led to her being taken into the royal harem. That night God warned the king in a dream: “Return the man’s wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you, and you will live” (Gn 20:7). As a prophet Abraham *transmitted messages to people for God*, and even *interceded for them*, as he did for Sodom and Gomorrah. In the days before God’s word was put down in writing, the patriarchs served as his prophets.

When we talk about OT prophets, however, there is one man who stands out head and shoulders above the rest of the pack. That man is Moses. What was it that made the prophetic ministry of Moses so special? We have the answer from the lips of God himself in Numbers 12:1-8. There we’re told that Miriam, Moses’ older sister, and Aaron, his older brother, “began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife.” It seems quite clear from the Hebrew text that Miriam was the ringleader here. The Hebrew verb (“began to talk against...”) is a feminine form. Besides, the fact that only Miriam was punished by leprosy seems to single her out as the instigator.

The first charge raised by Moses’ siblings (that Moses had married an African woman) was clearly a pretext. The real reason for their complaint was that they were not receiving the recognition Moses was. “Has the LORD spoken only through Moses?” they asked. “Hasn’t he also spoken through us?” A classic case of jealousy, wouldn’t you say? Now to be sure, there was some substance to their complaint. When God’s people needed to reach an important decision, Aaron as high priest had the privilege which even Moses did not enjoy of using the Urim and Thummim to determine God’s yes or his no. And Miriam is acknowledged as a prophetess (Ex 15:20). When, centuries later, God through the prophet Micah reproved his people’s unbelief, he is quoted as saying:

My people, what have I done to you?  
 How have I burdened you? Answer me.  
 I brought you up out of Egypt  
 and redeemed you from the land of slavery.  
 I sent Moses to lead you,  
*also Aaron and Miriam* (Mi 6:3f) .

In a sense, then, the charge Moses’ siblings raised had an element of truth. God spoke not only with Moses: he had spoken also with them.

God’s answer to their charge, however, makes it very clear that Moses had a unique position in OT prophetic revelation.

When a prophet of the LORD is among you  
 I reveal myself to him in visions,  
 I speak to him in dreams.  
 But this is not true of my servant Moses;  
 he is faithful in all my house.

With him I speak face to face,  
clearly and not in riddles;  
he sees the form of the LORD.

Why then were you not afraid  
to speak against my servant Moses? (Nu 12:6-8).

The closing verses of the book of Deuteronomy provide further evidence that “no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face.... No one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel” (Dt 33: 10.12). There are a number of reasons why God could say that. For one, *the role God assigned to Moses* was an absolutely unique one. “The law was given through Moses,” John tells us in the prolog to his gospel. Moses was the man through whom God established the constitution of the theocracy. Moses was the mediator of the Sinaitic Covenant, that awesome body of legislation which God designed as a disciplinary mechanism, to shape and mold an immature and rebellious people into his kind of people — beloved and obedient children in his family, custodians of his written revelation, and cradle of the Savior God had promised to give the world.

Really, though, God’s words in Dt 33 point to another reason why Moses’ place at the head of all the OT prophets is unchallenged, and that is the *nature of the revelation God shared with him*. That revelation was, first of all, *abundant*. Moses’ call came at the burning bush (Ex 3:1ff), where he saw, for the first time (but not for the last) the appearance of the *kh’bod JHWN*, that awesome appearance of the covenant God in flame and smoke. There at the burning bush Moses not only *saw* an impressive demonstration of the majesty and the mercy of Israel’s covenant God, he *heard* Jehovah’s voice.

What did God have to say to his brand new prophet? Well, he first of all scared the daylights out of him. “Do not come any closer! And take off your sandals! This is holy ground.” For the sake of his grace God is the one you don’t fool around with. And then, after commanding Moses to *stand back* in awe, God invited him to *stand up* for service. “I have seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I am concerned about their suffering, and I have come down to rescue them. So now I am sending you to bring my people out of Egypt.” What an impressive revelation — truly one-of-a-kind! The closing words of Deuteronomy are true: “No prophet has risen in Israel like Moses.”

Nowhere is this more apparent than at Mt. Sinai. Israel spent about a year at Mt. Sinai, and during that time Moses made a number of trips up the mountain to speak with God, and to receive the revelation he would then transmit to the people. The LORD of the covenant condescended to speak to Moses *face to face* (Nu 12:8; Dt 34:10). “No prophet has risen in Israel like Moses.”

It cannot be overemphasized that the revelation God shared with Moses, and which Moses shared with Israel during forty years in the desert was a twofold one: the message of *law and gospel*.

The first words God spoke to Moses when the nation reached the Sinai desert was: “Tell the people of Israel: ... ‘If you obey me fully and’ keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19:3-6). There is the message of God’s law, in all of its impossible enormity. “If you can think, feel, and act like me,” God says, “then you will be my people.” Remember Jesus’ response to the expert in the law who asked: “What must I do to be saved?” Jesus asked: “What is written in the law?” And when the expert answered “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your strength and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself,” Jesus responded: “You have answered correctly. Do this, and you will live” (Lk 10:27f). Moses faithfully transmitted the message of *God’s law* to Abraham’s stubborn, willful descendants, people whom St. Paul characterized as irresponsible, immature minor children. Even when bidding farewell to Israel, Moses reminded them: “If you fully obey the LORD your God and follow all his commands ... you will be blessed. ... However, if you do not obey the LORD your God, all these curses will come upon you” (Dt 28:1ff.15ff), and Moses proceeded to list a whole chapterful of specific curses.

That is still the message of God’s law today, which the sinful descendants of Adam need to hear. “God is fair; he’s just; he’s even-handed. Keep his law, and you will live. Break it, and you are a criminal, and

criminals do not mix with a beautiful, majestic, clean God.” That message is hard on the nerves, but it’s a message sinners must hear. You will recall that shortly before Luther’s death a controversy broke out in the Lutheran Church which we call the Antinomian Controversy. John Agricola, a man who had been Luther’s close friend, expressed contempt for the law of God and began to teach that true knowledge of sin and genuine contrition are produced not by the law but by the gospel. Now if that’s true, it would follow that there is really no use in the church for the law of God. To this Luther responded: “The law is to be taught to reveal sin, to accuse, terrify and damn the conscience. If we cast the law aside, we shall not long retain Christ. Moses knew that, too, and preached the message of *God’s law* faithfully.

But Moses knew that the message of God’s law is not God’s final word to the human race. Before saying good-bye to the people of Israel he told them: “I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now *choose life*, so that you and your children may live” (Dt 30:19). Moses had been present at Mt. Sinai. He had seen the flames shooting out of that mountain; he had felt the earth quaking beneath his feet. And he had heard what God said to the thoroughly terrified people of Israel. No doubt they expected God to read the riot act to them. But what did God say to the people of Israel from Mt. Sinai before he ever announced a single commandment? “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Ex 20:2). Of these words August Pieper wrote: “There is no purer, more heartwarming gospel in the whole Scripture than this.”

Moses, the prophet like whom no prophet arose in Israel, knew that the principle by which God would rescue a world gone astray was the *principle of substitution*. God used Moses to share that knowledge with ancient Israel. He directed people to the great Prophet whom God would raise up from their midst. That was the Prophet who would bring a message of reconciliation and life to sinners otherwise doomed to being perpetual divorced from God. Moses was a prophet who preached law *and gospel* to God’s people. St. John chapter 5 records one of the unpleasant confrontations Jesus had with the hardened Jewish opposition. This one followed his miracle at the pool of Bethesda. In the course of that conversation Jesus testified to Moses as a preacher of the gospel. He told his opponents: “I have come in my Father’s name, and you do not accept me. ... If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for *he wrote of me*” (Jn 5:43.46). In Deuteronomy 18:15 Moses directed the people to look forward to the great Prophet whom God would raise up and through whom God would say all that he had to say to the human race.

As we chart the march of prophecy down the pages of the OT, we see a long line of men and women to whom God revealed his truth and through whom he channeled his truth to his people. Among all of the OT prophets, however, Moses has no equal. “The LORD spoke with Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend” (Ex 33:11).

We New Testament prophets cannot match the *manner* in which Moses received the revelation he was called to transmit to the people of God. We have, however, been given the same *message*. Moses and we have a dual message to speak. The message of law and gospel is the beating heart of Lutheran Christianity. The Formula of Concord (in Article V, *Of the Law and the Gospel*) calls the distinction between the law and the gospel “a special brilliant light, by which the word of God is rightly divided” and urges that this distinction “be maintained in the Church with great diligence” (FC V:2). On the day of our ordination every man in this room affirmed with an oath that properly distinguishing law and gospel would characterize all our preaching. More about that in the coming weeks. Let it suffice for now simply to state that our preaching will be *truly prophetic* preaching, and *truly Lutheran* preaching to the degree that it maintains this distinction between law and gospel.

## II. UNDER THE THEOCRACY

Israel’s entrance into its new homeland was a mixed blessing for the covenant nation. On the one hand, they were happy that their difficult desert journey was over, happy that they could finally settle down in a land God promised they could call their own. But new dangers faced the nation in Canaan. During the wilderness years, the fact that the people lived close together in the camp made it possible for Moses and the Levites to

instruct the people in the ways of the Lord. That would be impossible, however, once the Israelites were scattered throughout the promised land, on both sides of the Jordan. In addition, they would be exposed to varieties of false religions which they had never met and which they would be tempted to copy.

Take just one example. When the Israelites entered Canaan, they were not farmers. They had been cattlemen when they had first migrated to Egypt, and during their last years there they had been slaves, laboring on Pharaoh's building projects. They had spent the forty years immediately prior to entering Canaan wandering in the desert. Upon entering Canaan, therefore, they naturally asked: "How are we going to practice agriculture in a land with a rainfall pattern totally strange to us?" They were going to meet prophets who would tell them: "To farm in Canaan you've got to worship the fertility gods. You can still be loyal to your Jehovah, but you'd better pay your dues to Baal and Ashtaroth." Syncretism had a powerful appeal. (Many of you know it still does, especially those of you who've had to discipline a member who has joined a masonic lodge but still wants to retain his membership in your congregation).

The theocracy, the form of government God had designed for the covenant people, was something totally new to them. And so Moses, in his farewell address to Israel, spoke of three offices God was instituting to provide for the physical and spiritual welfare of his people. Dt 17:14ff speaks about the office of the *king*, whose job it was to protect God's people. The opening verses of Dt 18 speak of the office of the *priest*, who would be the mediator, to open the sinner's path to God. And then, in view of Moses' imminent death, some other arrangement had to be made for transmitting God's word and will to Israel on a continuing basis. God didn't want his people to copy their Canaanite neighbors and rely on superstition or practicing divination or consulting the dead to find out what his will was. But if the people of God were not to use the sources of information the Canaanites regularly consulted, how were they to learn what they needed to know for their life in their new homeland? God instituted the office of *prophet* on a continuing basis. Dt 18:15-22 speaks about the prophet in Israel.

Just an aside here. I have the uncomfortable feeling that many see in Dt 18:15ff no more than a Messianic prophecy referring to the great Prophet through whom God would speak to his people. Now, to be sure, this passage did form part of the Messianic expectation of Israel. Peter makes that clear in Acts 3:22. But Dt 18:20-22 presupposes that *many* prophets would arise in Israel, not just *one*. God here promised that his people wouldn't have to turn to the secret arts to learn his will. He would at all times and from the Israelite community raise up men to bring his word to his people.

The institution of the prophetic office is surely evidence of the sovereign grace of God. Israel's prophets were not merely religious geniuses, nor did they appear because Israel was a particularly religious nation. The picture the OT paints of Israel shows them to be anything but a religiously advanced nation. Even while Moses was on Mt. Sinai they fashioned a golden calf and instituted false worship, bringing down on themselves a frightening display of God's anger. The picture the OT consistently paints of Israel is that of a corrupt and backslidden nation. How can anyone imagine that an institution as sublime as the prophetic office could arise spontaneously from such a corrupt nation? Of course there are similarities between Israel's prophets and the false prophets from heathen nations, but those resemblances are only superficial. St. Peter tells us in his second epistle: "Prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pt 1:21).

The years *following the invasion and conquest* of the promised land were not good ones for the people of God. They managed to allocate the land and carve out homesteads and make a living for themselves, but spiritually there wasn't a whole lot of difference between the Israelites and their heathen neighbors. Think of the repeated refrain during the 300-year *period of the Judges* (that period immediately preceding the establishment of Israel's monarchy): "Everyone did as he saw fit" (Ju 21:25). Few representatives of God appeared to let the voice of God be heard. We know of at least two exceptions to that rule: the prophetess Deborah (Ju 4:4) and an unnamed prophet at the time of Gideon who warned the people of Israel: "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel says: I brought you up out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. I snatched you from the power of Egypt and from the hand of all your oppressors. I drove them from before you and gave you their



land. I said to you, ‘I am the LORD your God; do not worship the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you live.’ *But you have not listened to me*” (Ju 6:7ff).

And so the worst judgment that can fall on anyone fell on the Israelites. God began to *withdraw his word*. It was as though he was telling Israel: “Very well; if you don’t want my word, I won’t bother you with it.” 1 Sm 3:1 describes conditions in Israel at the time Samuel was a boy: “In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions.” The high priest was Eli, a man whose conduct of his high office earned him the Lord’s rebuke: “Why do you scorn my sacrifice and offering...? Why do you honor your sons more than me” (1 Sm 2:29)?

It was in that dark hour that a merciful God, always unpredictable, again did the unexpected. His word and vision passed to a child not even grown to manhood. Under Samuel there was a revival of prophecy. The Scripture tells us: “The LORD revealed himself to Samuel through his word. And Samuel’s word came to all Israel” (1 Sm 3:21-4:1). Samuel was God’s man for one of the darkest hours in the nation’s history.

Samuel served his God and his people in a number of different ways. In the absence of a king, he was their *leader* — not only a political and military leader, but when the Philistines captured the ark of the covenant and destroyed the sanctuary at Shiloh, the nation’s spiritual leader. Samuel was a *judge*, each year riding a circuit from his home in Ramah to Bethel to Gilgal to Mizpah and back to Ramah. He served as a *priest*, offering sacrifice and interceding to God for the people. But Samuel’s most notable contribution was as *prophet*, transmitting the message God had revealed to him. And among his duties as prophet the one which probably made the greatest contribution to the spiritual life of Israel was his role in furthering the theological training of the next generation of God’s messengers. These were the so-called “sons of the prophets.” Whether or not Samuel *organized* these companies of young prophets the Scripture does not say, but it does say he was their leader (1 Sm 19:20). These theological schools seemed to have operated at a number of different locations. What happened to them after Samuel’s death we don’t know, for we don’t hear of the “*sons of the prophets*” again until the dark days of Elijah and Elisha, almost two centuries later. So much is true, however: at the time of Israel’s deepest apostasy, God showed his mercy by using Samuel to prepare a steady supply of young men who were committed to hearing the voice of God and to sharing with others what they had heard.

In addition to providing this steady supply of candidates for the prophetic ministry, God also *called men directly* to be his prophets. We’ll be mentioning them by name as we review the message of their individual prophecies. But for now let’s look at the *titles* the Scripture uses for the prophets. It often calls them “*seers*” (Heb. *ro’eh* or *chozeh*). This title emphasizes that what the prophets spoke did not originate within themselves, but with what the Lord revealed to them. Listen, e.g., to the opening words of Amos’ prophecy: “The *words* of Amos...*which he saw* concerning Israel ...” (Am 1:1). Micah begins his prophecy with these words: “The word of the LORD that came to Micah ... *the vision he saw* concerning Judah and Jerusalem” (Mi 1:1). In other words, when showing the prophet a vision, the Lord placed the very words into his mouth which he wanted him to speak. The prophetic *message* was given to the prophet in connection with the *beholding*.

The presupposition with which we approach the Scriptures of the OT is that the word which the prophet’s lips speak or his pen records is a word to which mankind itself is blind. The prophetic message is not a teaching which simply reflects the prophet’s background. What makes the prophets great is not their skill at holding a wet finger to the wind, to determine which way it’s blowing. The Lord’s prophets were men who, like Samuel, had learned to say: “Speak, LORD, your servant is listening.” The prophets never really explain *how* the divine message came to them. We needn’t insist that God spoke in an audible voice or in the Hebrew language, although there’s no good reason why we should rule that out, either.

The most common title for the prophet, a title used more than 300 times in the OT and simply translated “prophet,” is *nabi*. Bible scholars aren’t agreed on the *derivation* of *nabi*, but OT use of the term leaves no doubt about its meaning. You will recall that when God called Moses to confront the Egyptian Pharaoh and order him to release the Israelites, Moses protested: “I speak with faltering lips.” Now listen to God’s answer to Moses’ objection: “I have made you *like God* to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be *your prophet*. You are

to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh” (Ex 7: 1f) .God called Aaron the *nabi*, who was to transmit to Pharaoh the messages God would reveal to Moses.

Still another title for the OT prophet is *‘ish ‘elohim*, a “man of God.” The prophet was, in a very special sense, *God’s man*. Not only had he received a revelation from him, not only was he called to speak for him, but he *served God*. He had no will of his own; his will was captive to God’s revealed will. When God called Amos, a shepherd and fig-picker, to leave his little village of Tekoa, twelve miles south of Jerusalem, and to prophesy in Samaria, the proud capital of the neighboring nation of Israel, Amos’ response was: “The lion has roared — who will not fear? The Sovereign LORD has spoken — who can but prophesy?” (Am 3:8) When God called him, Amos realized he had no choice. God’s men no more chose to be prophets than you choose to be afraid when a lion roars at you from ten feet away.

Entrusting the preaching of his word to weak, fallible human beings, frail jars of clay, was a calculated risk on God’s part. Human beings make mistakes, and God on occasion had to overrule and override the well-meant declaration of his prophets. When, e.g., David stated his intention of building a temple for the Lord, the prophet Nathan told him: “Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the LORD is with you” (2 Sm 7:3). That night, however, the LORD informed Nathan that not David but David’s son was to build the temple.

Sometimes God’s prophets — frail creatures of dust, remember, and sinful creatures who had an old Adam — overstepped their bounds and stepped *outside of their call* and sometimes even *outside of God’s will*. Then they were properly rebuked by God. Think of Jonah. To judge the shabby way the people of Israel had been treating his word, God served notice on them that he could withdraw his word if they no longer wanted it. He therefore commanded Jonah to discontinue his prophetic ministry in Israel and instead to take his message of law and gospel to Nineveh, capital of the Assyrian Empire. Something inside Jonah rebelled at that assignment. Assyria was not only a heathen nation, but an enemy of Israel. Deep down inside Jonah would have liked nothing better than to have God’s judgment *destroy* Assyria, (maybe by reducing it to a pile of charcoal). But instead God was asking him to bring those wicked Assyrians the only message which can *rescue* anyone from God’s judgment? No way! This stubborn, spunky prophet actually disobeyed God’s call. Using sinful humans as his prophetic messengers was a calculated risk on God’s part.

God’s call to the man he wanted to use as a prophet *often created a tension in the prophet*. When Moses was called by God, he pleaded: “Lord, please send somebody else to do it” (Ex 4:13). When God called Jeremiah, the answer he got was: “I do not know how to speak. I am only a child” (Jr 1:6). God’s prophets, “men of God,” often struggled with their calls. Sometimes this struggle was temporary, as it was with Moses. But sometimes that struggle was ongoing.

Jeremiah 20 gives us a classic example of this. In the last dozen verses of this chapter Jeremiah reflected on his prophetic office with mixed emotions. Check out verse 7. Jeremiah accused God of “deceiving” him (and the verb he used is elsewhere used to describe a young man seducing a girl). Jeremiah’s prophetic ministry hadn’t turned out at all like he had hoped. He also reminded God that he had been faithful in proclaiming the messages God had given him, and what did he get for it? “The word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long” (20:8). Why, Jeremiah had spent the previous day in the stocks. Jeremiah realized he had become a laughingstock to the people of Jerusalem. The prophet was sick of being asked the question, “What’s the bad news today, Jerry?” God’s call often created a tension in the prophet.

Back to Jeremiah 20. Look at the prophet’s mood swing from *dissatisfaction* (vv 7-10) to joyous *trust* (vv 11-13) to deep *despondency* (vv 14-18). “May the day I was born be cursed! I wish God had killed me in the womb, with my mother as my grave, her womb enlarged forever.” Have you ever read anything like that? “I wish my mother had been perpetually pregnant instead of giving birth to me!” God’s call often created a tension in the prophet. Jeremiah thought of resigning his call. “But if I say, ‘I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,’ his word is in my heart like a fire ... shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot” (20:9).

It’s this same prophet Jeremiah who — more clearly than any other prophet — describes a calamitous development in the long history of prophecy: the rise of *false prophets*. Among the men whom God called to

speak for him there were defections, just as happened also among Christ's disciples. False prophets are described by God at some length in Jeremiah 23:

I did not send these prophets, yet they have run with their message; I did not speak to them, yet they have prophesied...Let the prophet who has a dream tell his dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. ... I am against the prophets who wag their own tongues and yet declare, 'The LORD declares.' ... They lead my people astray with their reckless lies" (Jer 23:21.28 .31f).

Throughout all the time Israel lived in her promised land, false prophets would arise to deceive the people by claiming to speak for God. The prophet Ezekiel informs us that the incumbents in all three of Israel's highest offices prostituted their divine office.

Her *princes* like a roaring lion tearing its prey devour people. Her *priests* do violence to my law and profane my holy things so that I am profaned among them. Her *prophets* whitewash these deeds for them by false visions and lying divinations. They say, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says'— when the LORD has not spoken (Ezk 22:25-28)

Do you see a problem here? If two kinds of prophets existed side by side in Israel — the true and the false — how were the people of God to know which was which, who was true and who was false? If you had lived in the kingdom of Judah about 600 BC, would you have identified the old man who walked the dusty streets of Jerusalem day after day for almost forty years as a prophet of the Lord, the man named Jeremiah? He proclaimed the same monotonous message of impending doom on Judah for so many years that, as we heard earlier, he became the object of ridicule. God gave his people several yardsticks for measuring whether a prophet was a true one or a false one.

The first criterion was the *fulfillment of the man's prophetic utterance*. That might seem to be a very simple test of a prophet's truthfulness. When Jerusalem lay in smoldering ruins about them, no doubt many citizens wailed: "We should've listened to Jeremiah!" By contrast, Jeremiah 28 tells us about a false prophet named Hananiah, who lived about ten years before Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. At that time some of the people of Judah (among them King Jehoiachin and Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego) had already been deported to Babylon. In the house of the Lord Hananiah uttered this prophecy to Jeremiah:

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I will bring back to this place all the articles of the LORD's house that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon removed from here and took to Babylon. I will also bring back to this place Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim king of Judah and all the other exiles from Judah who went to Babylon,' declares the LORD. (Jr 28:2-4).

Now listen to what Jeremiah said in response: "The prophet who prophesies peace will be recognized as one truly sent by the LORD *only if his prediction comes true*. ... Listen, Hananiah! The LORD has not sent you, yet you have persuaded this nation to trust in lies. Therefore, this is what the LORD says: I am about to remove you from the face of the earth. This very year you are going to die, because you have preached rebellion against the LORD" (Jr 28:9.15f). Two months later Hananiah was dead.

That might seem to be a very simple test for determining whether a prophet was true or false: did his prophecy come true? In actual practice, however, it wasn't as simple as it might seem. There frequently was a long lapse of time between prophecy and fulfillment.

For more than forty years Jeremiah preached that Jerusalem would be destroyed. After 39 years of hearing such dire predictions the people might have thought he was a false prophet, because what he had threatened had not come true. The prophet Joel prophesied the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost (Jl 2:28-32). Imagine how many centuries were to elapse before this prophecy was fulfilled.

God gave his people a second criterion for determining whether a prophet was true or false. If a prophet spoke *in the name any god other than Jehovah*, he was a false prophet and was not to be obeyed.

In his farewell address to the people of Israel, Moses told them:

If a prophet ... appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, "Let us follow other gods" (gods you have not

known) “and let us worship them,” you must not listen to the words of that prophet ... The LORD your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul. ... That prophet ... must be put to death, because he preached rebellion against the LORD your God (Dt 13:1-5).

Through the pen of Jeremiah God announced judgment on false prophets in the words: “The prophets *prophesied by Baal*, following *worthless idols*. Therefore I bring charges against you again” (Jr 2:8). Here, then, was Israel’s second criterion for determining whether a prophet was true or false. Simply ask: “Does he encourage faithfulness to Jehovah, the Savior-God?” Even if his predictions came true, he was to be considered a false prophet if he led people astray from God to worship idols. Like the first criterion, however, this criterion was not as immediately helpful as it might at first seem. False prophets, then as now, came in sheep’s clothing. They rarely said: “Forget about the true God! Follow this new god I can show you!” Their message often had a show of piety. Jeremiah 7 informs us that there were false prophets in Jerusalem six centuries before Christ who told the people: You needn’t be afraid Jerusalem is going to be destroyed, as Jeremiah is threatening. Why, the temple of the Lord is here. God surely wouldn’t destroy his sanctuary, his earthly dwelling place, would he?” Listen to Jeremiah warn the people of Judah: “Do not trust in deceptive words and say, ‘This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD’” (Jr 7:4).

In the time remaining to us today let’s make a quick survey of the most famous of the *prophets who served Israel under the theocracy*.

At the *time of the united kingdom*, when Israel was a world power, the most important prophet, whose name has already been mentioned, was Samuel. Beginning with Samuel the prophets became the special guardians of the theocracy, which was in constant danger of corruption because of the apostasy of the kings and the idolatry of the people. The other predominant prophet in the united kingdom was Nathan, the man who preached law and gospel to King David. Many of the prophets are not known to us by name, and some are mentioned only briefly in the Scripture. They faithfully did their important work and passed from the scene without getting the attention Moses and Samuel and Elijah got.

The OT record is unblinkingly honest in reporting the activity of the prophets. It makes no attempt to whitewash them, but shows them to us “warts and all.” We learn, e.g., of Samuel’s indulgence to his own sons, appointing them as judges when they were obviously morally unfit to lead the people of God.

Israel’s united kingdom was short-lived, lasting only a little over a century. In 931 BC civil war tore the nation apart and ushered in the period we know as *the divided kingdom*. The world power had collapsed under the weight of power and prosperity. The descendants of Abraham had yielded to the temptation to idolatry. Their offenses were not just errors in judgment, which could have been avoided if they had only counted to ten. The covenant people, the nation God had formed for himself, to proclaim his praise, had turned from the knowledge of the true God to worthless idols. With the exception of a godly minority, the pious “remnant,” the entire nation — North and South -had rebelled against God’s great and good plan for them. The basic sin of which the prophets accused Israel and Judah was unbelief. It’s no wonder that God says in the opening words of the prophecy of Isaiah:

I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner’s manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand. (Is 1:2-3)

The difficult assignment of the prophets, therefore, was to stem the rush into apostasy and its inevitable consequence, destruction.

The prophets are usually listed under a number of different categories. We speak of *oral prophets* and *literary prophets*. All of the prophets, in the first instance, uttered their prophecies orally. Where God, however, felt that the proclamation of the prophetic word was not addressed chiefly to a contemporary crisis in the life of Israel but had permanent significance for coming generations, he inspired his prophet to commit the message to writing.

We speak of *major prophets* and *minor prophets*, a distinction which has to do only with size, not importance. In the Hebrew Bible the major prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. (The Hebrew canon does

not list Daniel among “The Prophets”). The writings of the twelve prophets from Hosea to Malachi all fit on one scroll, thus earning them the designation “minor.”

*In the kingdom of the ten apostate tribes*, the Lord’s faithful prophets took a powerful stand against the false worship of God and the increasing worship of idols. Ahijah predicted that God would tear the kingdom out of the hands of Solomon and give ten tribes to Jeroboam (1 Kg 11:29-31). He later rebuked Jeroboam for building calf-shrines at Dan and Bethel, and prophesied disaster on his house (1 Kg 14). Jehu prophesied judgment on the house of King Baasha (1 Kg 16:1.7.12). In the period from 875-800 BC powerful Elijah and his successor Elisha were God’s messengers especially to the royal house of Omri and Ahab, who had imported Baal-worship into the northern kingdom and made it the state religion. Micaiah also spoke the unpleasant truth to wicked King Ahab, even though he paid a price. Sentenced to Ahab’s prison, he got nothing but bread and water to eat.

There were several *literary* prophets who served in the northern kingdom. Jonah had his prophetic ministry in Israel interrupted when God called him to preach repentance to Nineveh, capital of imperial Assyria. By pulling his prophet out of Israel God was serving notice on an apostate nation: “If you don’t want my word, I can give it to another nation.”

The “Golden Age of Israelite Prophecy” was the period from about 775 to 700 BC, the era in which four eminent prophets were active. Two of the four served in the *northern kingdom*. Hosea was the prophet to whom God gave the shocking command: “Marry a prostitute!” The Lord’s command was a *preachment of law*, for the nation was guilty of spiritual adultery. But the Lord’s command to Hosea was also a *preachment of gospel*, symbolizing the truth that Jehovah had not abandoned his good plan for Israel; he still wanted a close union.

Amos was a herdsman and picker of sycamore figs, whose home was in Judah. God called him to go to Samaria, proud capital of the northern kingdom and preach against her idolatry. Consider the factors which made Amos’ ministry uncommonly difficult. He had no formal theological training, and would therefore not be recognized by the religious establishment. He would be viewed as an outsider and told to go home. And he had a unpleasant message to deliver. Luther summarized Amos’ prophecy as “more law and less gospel than any other prophet.” The book of Amos contains eight oracles of divine judgment, five visions of judgment, and a beautiful prophecy about the rebuilding of the collapsing royal house of David (the fulfillment of which is recorded at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15 :15ff) ).

There were eight literary prophets who prophesied in the *southern kingdom of Judah* prior to the fall of Jerusalem and the exile in Babylon. Two of these belong to the “Golden Age”: Isaiah was the prophet who at his call (ch. 6) was given the difficult assignment of preaching to harden the people of Judah. That was God’s answer to their unbelief. Although they refused heed God’s call to repentance, they would continue to hear it. But the word which they refused to hear for their salvation they would now hear for their condemnation.

The fourth of the great 8<sup>th</sup> century prophets was Micah, a man from an insignificant village 20 miles west of Jerusalem who was dedicated to Jehovah and sensitive to the suffering of the poor at the hand of powerful and wealthy oppressors.

The occasion for the prophecy of Joel was a dreadful plague of locusts. In this national calamity Joel saw God intervening in judgment, a forerunner of Judgment Day. He called the people of Judah to repentance (“Rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate,” 2:13).

Joel is also the “Prophet of Pentecost,” whose prophecy of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was quoted by Peter on the first Pentecost.

The prophecy of Habakkuk is a dialog between Habakkuk and God. Habakkuk was having difficulty reconciling the existence of evil with the Lord’s governance. God comforted his prophet by urging him to trust God’s promise — to save his people and to put down the arrogant. In the Lord’s answer Habakkuk found reason to rejoice and to praise him.

Several of Judah’s prophets addressed their prophetic messages to Judah’s heathen neighbors. Obadiah addressed a brief oracle of judgment to Edom, Israel’s neighbor to the south. Because of her inveterate hostility

to the covenant people, Edom would be crushed. All who oppose God and his people will be crushed, but Jehovah will reign forever.

The prophecy of Nahum forms a sequel to the prophecy of Jonah. It's an oracle promising doom for Assyria. In stark contrast to her past record of cruel conquest, Assyria's downfall would be evidence of the Lord's retribution.

Zephaniah foretold "the day of the LORD," a day of universal judgment, symbolized by naming nations at all four points of the compass. His prophecy closes with a promise to the remnant ("my worshipers, my scattered people"), that their restoration would be as universal as God's judgment had been.

Jeremiah was the last of Judah's pre-exilic prophets. His forty-year ministry took him to the time Babylon's armies broke down Jerusalem's walls, trashed and then torched the temple, and led the inhabitants into exile. Considered a traitor because he predicted Judah's defeat at the hand of Babylon, Jeremiah lived a lonely life as he attempted to call a restless and rebellious nation to repentance. With the covenant people about to be deported into exile, their capital city besieged, their sacred ark about to be taken as a prize of war (perhaps to some Babylonian museum), Jeremiah spoke his most beautiful prophecy (31:31-34). Nowhere in any of the writings of the prophets is the contrast between the Sinaitic covenant and God's new covenant, his permanent contract for all people for all time, expressed more clearly.

When the armies of Babylon broke down Jerusalem's walls, they brought the theocracy to an end. No *king* sat any longer in the palace in Jerusalem; that palace, after having been plundered, was burned to the ground. No *priest* offered sacrifices any longer on the big bronze altar outside the temple. That had been carried to Babylon as scrap metal. No incense was offered any longer on the incense altar inside the temple. With a broken heart the psalmist tells God: "Your foes roared in the place where you met with us ... They behaved like men wielding axes to cut through a thicket of trees. They smashed all the carved paneling with their axes and hatchets. They burned your sanctuary to the ground; they defiled the dwelling place of your Name" (Ps 74:4-7). Jerusalem's desolation was complete. Had centuries of inspired prophecy failed? No; its fulfillment lay on the horizon. We'll want to look at that fulfillment next.

### III. FROM EXILE TO THE FULFILLMENT OF PROPHECY

In ancient times when a nation was captured and deported to a foreign land, that usually marked the end that nation's history. The exiles either died in slavery, or they lost their national identity. After the northern ten tribes of Israel were led off into the Assyrian Captivity, e.g., they were never heard from again. We still refer to them as the "lost ten tribes." If God had not intervened, that would have been the fate of the exiles from Judah, who were deported to Babylon over a 20-year period beginning in 605 BC.

But that could not be, and was not to be, the fate of the exiles from Judah. The promise God had made to Abraham ("All peoples on earth will be blessed through you") did not allow God to abandon Abraham's descendants in the land of their exile. The exile lasted seventy years, and during all that time God designated chosen messengers in Babylon to maintain contact with his people. God channeled his messages to his people through two men: Ezekiel and Daniel. Ezekiel was a priest, and lived among the exiles at the Kebar River. Daniel was a statesman, and lived at the court.

What was unique about the prophetic ministry of Ezekiel? For starters, we usually associate Ezekiel *with visions*. To assure Ezekiel of his divine call, e.g., and to empower him for his prophetic task, God gave him a vision of *the glory of the LORD*, that awesome appearance of the covenant God in cloud and flame and smoke. Throughout the centuries of the OT, especially when it seemed that God's redemptive plan was in jeopardy, the invisible God would wrap himself in his earthly "clothing" of smoke and fire — sometimes to warn his enemies, usually to reassure his people. The opening chapter of Ezekiel's prophecy tells us how God found this young priest among the Jewish exiles and called him to be his prophet. Ezekiel *chapter 1* gives us the most detailed description of this phenomenon, the *k'bhod JHWH*, to be found anywhere in the Scripture. The following year Ezekiel received another vision (*chapter 8*). He was permitted to see what was happening in the

temple in Jerusalem, a thousand miles away! He saw the image of an idol in the temple which had been dedicated to Jehovah. He saw 70 elders secretly burning incense to paintings of unclean animals. He saw women worshipping a Mesopotamian fertility god. He saw 25 men, most likely priests, worshipping the sun god. *Chapter 37* records Ezekiel's vision of a valley filled with dry bones which, at God's command, came together to form skeletons, were clothed with flesh to form corpses, and then had life breathed into them. This vision was God's assurance, first, that the people of God would not die out in Babylon but would be restored to their homeland and, second, that God would put his Spirit in people to create spiritual life where there had been only death. The most unusual vision God granted Ezekiel is the one that occupies the last nine chapters of his book (*chs 40-48*). It's an elaborate vision showing Ezekiel the restored temple of God, the redeemed community.

The *pre-exilic* prophets had tried unsuccessfully to halt Israel's rush to destruction, warning of God's judgment and calling to repentance. After the crash came, the two exilic prophets comforted the survivors, and assured them of God's continuing love and purpose.

God's prophets did that primarily *with words* Ezekiel serves as a good example, however, of how the prophets prophesied also *with symbolic actions*, with so-called *action-prophecies*. A couple examples.

Half a dozen years before Jerusalem fell to the Babylonian army God instructed Ezekiel to take a tablet of fresh clay and to sketch the city of Jerusalem under siege — playing war games, if you will. God explained: "This will be a sign to the house of Israel" (4:3). A short time later Ezekiel was told to shave off his hair and beard and to divide the hair into three piles. He was then told to burn one-third of it, to chop another third with a sword, and to scatter the remaining third to the wind, to symbolize what was going to happen to the inhabitants of Jerusalem (5:12).

God frequently commanded his prophets to preach by means of such "charades." Jeremiah was commanded to go about the city of Jerusalem wearing an ox's yoke on his back (Jr 27:2ff), to symbolize that nations were going to be subject to Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar. A century earlier Isaiah was told to prophesy that Assyria would be victorious in battle and would lead people off as prisoners of war. To symbolize that God told Isaiah to take off the sackcloth clothing he was wearing and to go around "stripped and barefoot" (Is 20:2f). I imagine Isaiah wore a loincloth, to simulate a POW. Can you imagine how embarrassing that must have been for that man of God?

Back to Ezekiel. Another interesting element of his prophecy is a series of oracles of judgment *against heathen nations* (Ezk 25-32). The prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah also include a similar list. One is inclined to ask: "What good purpose was served by predicting God's judgment on heathen nations who would only laugh at the threats of Israel's God?" God knew in advance, of course, how these oracles would be received. And yet he wanted Israel's heathen neighbors to know *he was aware* of the ungodly goings-on in their countries, and that he *held them accountable*. On Judgment Day they are without excuse. In addition, those oracles served to reassure his faithful remnant that God had heard the threats of their enemies, and that in his good time he would vindicate his people.

Before we move on to the prophecy of Daniel, one more comment about Ezekiel might be in place. Ezekiel was a *priest* as well as a *prophet*, as were also Jeremiah and Zechariah. According to negative critical scholars, Israel's prophets were opponents of temple religion. They draw this conclusion from passages (Is 1: 11-17; Is 58: 3f.6; and Amos 5:21-24) in which the prophets condemned Israel's sacrificial worship. According to the historical-critical view, the *priests* regarded the ministry of sacrificing as the heart of OT religion. The *prophets*, on the other hand, are said to have contended for pure faith which showed itself in righteous living. Understandably, we are told, there was antagonism and conflict between the two.

But that view misrepresents the facts in the case. Prophets like Isaiah and Amos were opposed not only to false *worship*; they were opposed also to false *prophets*. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah urged the returning exiles to rebuild the temple, and promised God's blessings on the project. Prophets sought not to eliminate temple worship, but to *purify* it.

Ezekiel's contemporary in Babylon during the years of exile was Daniel. He had been deported to Babylon as a young man, very possibly a teen-ager, and remained there for 70 years. In his twofold position at the royal court (governor of the province, as well as the king's chief adviser), Daniel was in a strategic position to influence the king's decisions and to help the exiles. The basic message of the book of Daniel is the *superiority of Israel's God to the idols of heathen nations*. The more well-known portion of Daniel is the first half of the book (chs 1-6), consisting of narratives which occurred during the reigns of Babylonian kings Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar and Persian king Cyrus. The second half of the book (chs 7-12) is less well-known. It records visions granted to Daniel which announce God's *judgment on world powers* that oppressed God's people, but which also announce the ultimate *triumph awaiting God's people*. Daniel's prophecy reassured a people crushed by defeat and deportation that God was still in control, and that he would carry out his gracious plan despite opposition from hostile world powers.

It was the preaching of faithful prophets like Ezekiel and Daniel that sustained the faith of the believing exiles during the difficult days of exile. The exile came to a sudden end in 539 BC, when Medo-Persian King Cyrus toppled proud Babylon and announced to the Jewish exiles: "You are free to return home. Let your temple be rebuilt, with the costs to be paid by the royal treasury."

Several years after that the first contingent of exiles, numbering fewer than 43,000, reached Jerusalem, under the leadership of Zerubbabel. Top priority for them was the rebuilding of their desolate sanctuary. Within a year of their return they had laid the foundation for the new temple, had rebuilt the altar of burnt offering, and had offered sacrifices on it. That's when the trouble started.

There was opposition from the Samaritan neighbors, who were miffed when the Jews refused to let them take part in building the temple. Other enemies of the Jews threatened them with physical harm if they didn't stop building. The result was that the building project came to a standstill for about sixteen years. By that time the Jews had gotten used to worshipping in the ruins of what had been their temple. Besides that, times were hard, and the Jews had convinced themselves: "This isn't the time to build the Lord's house" (Hg 1:2).

That's where matters stood about 520 BC when the prophet Haggai came on the scene. He spoke *four words about rebuilding the temple and about its future glory*. He rebuked the people sharply for setting wrong priorities. "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?" he asked (Hg 1:4). Building operations resumed three weeks later. A month later a spirit of frustration had again seized the people, this time when they compared what they could see of their new temple with what they had heard about the splendor of Solomon's temple. (The Most Holy Place alone, a 30' cube, had been paneled with 30 tons of gold). Haggai encouraged them: "The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house," but the people remained unmoved. Haggai followed with a sermon of law and gospel. No sacrifice offered by people who refuse to obey the Lord wholeheartedly is acceptable to God. When they learn to put first things first, God will bless every aspect of their lives. Four years later the temple was dedicated. Measured by tangible yardsticks, no prophet was more successful than Haggai.

Zechariah was a contemporary of Haggai. Like Haggai, Zechariah was called to work among a small and discouraged group of returnees who seemed to have little evidence that God was present in their midst. It was Zechariah's job to encourage them to look past outward appearances and instead to recognize and rejoice in the spiritual and future glory of God's Church. Like Ezekiel, Zechariah received much of his message *in visions* — eight of them. His prophecy closes with *two great prophecies* about God's Messianic king, prophecies that are the reason why Zechariah is known as "the prophet of Holy Week."

The disappointing spiritual conditions among the Jews who had returned from exile prompted God to send them one more prophet, the last of the Minor Prophets. Where there is faithlessness, there is selfishness, and self-righteousness, and arrogance. These were the problems with which Malachi had to deal, specific areas of life in which he called the people to repentance. Contributing to their sad condition may also have been disillusionment over the fact that the return from captivity had not ushered in a millennialistic Messianic age. Outward evidences of Jehovah's love for the chosen people disappointed them and led them to question his justice. Malachi's prophecy has two parts. He first of all rebuked the people of Judah and issued a *call to*



*repentance*. His prophecy comes to a close as *he predicted the coming of the Messiah and of his forerunner*. A unique feature which will help you to remember Malachi's prophecy is that there are half a dozen *lively debates* between God and his people. As God called them to repentance they gave him backtalk.

Malachi was the last of the OT prophets. When the theocracy disappeared, never again to be restored, and the period of the OT passed into the Intertestamental Period, the gift of prophecy ceased. As Israel's Bible neared completion, the existence of God's word in its entirety made direct communication from God to his covenant people unnecessary. You will recall that when the rich man wanted God to send a special divine revelation to his five brothers he was told: "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them" (Lk 16: 29).

We have now surveyed the prophets of the Old Testament. Before we leave them to follow the march of prophecy to its fulfillment in the New Testament, let's take one final look at that illustrious roster. What is there about these men that we pastors need to learn? What were their most impressive traits? I submit there are two.

The first is their *unblinking loyalty to God*. Like us, the OT prophets knew the temptation to be self-centered. They had old Adams, too, which whispered: "Don't let God make a fool of you! Don't give up your personal freedom! You'll never reach self-fulfillment that way!" But as we follow the prophets across the pages of the OT, as we listen to their words and observe their behavior, we don't see men whose loyalty to God bent their personalities out of shape. We do see intelligent men who, in spite of human frailty, took captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. They brought to God the sacrifice of their reason. And now note the results, please. The prophets found lives of perfect freedom, they reached their fullest potential, and they were of the greatest usefulness to God. Something our generation, with its emphasis on self-satisfaction and self-fulfillment, needs to learn, wouldn't you say? This concept of finding freedom by submitting to God's will is nothing new for New Testament believers. All of us have heard the Savior invite us: "Take my yoke upon you." We've heard him promise: "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." The prophets knew that obedience to God is not a *burden to be endured*. Actually it's the most positive *expression of our confidence* in God.

After their *loyalty to God*, the outstanding characteristic of the OT prophets is their *loyalty to his word of law and gospel*. Some OT scholars have insisted that the same prophet would not deliver messages of *doom* and of *hope*. Where both messages occur, therefore, these scholars conclude they must have been spoken by different men. The literary partition of Isaiah is traceable, at least in part, to this mistaken view.

The prophets were accurate in assessing, first of all, the evil nature of man. The history of Israel has been called a "history of failure" — failure to be what God called her to be. As a nation, the Israelites ignored the appeals of the prophets to return to God. The prophets were almost alone in their struggle against idolatry. Although there were times when pious kings (like Hezekiah and Josiah) carried out religious reforms, these reforms never really reached the heart of the people. After the good king died, the people reverted to their former religious practices.

The prophets knew that the only message which can convict a person of his sin is the message of God's absolute unwillingness to compromise with evil. They knew there's only one thing God can do with sin, and that is to turn from it by an awful act of judgment. They preached that *message of God's law*. They preached it, first of all, *with a heavy heart*. Micah announced the judgment soon to overtake Israel because of her sin and then added:

Because of this I will weep and wail; I will go about barefoot and naked. I will howl like a jackal and moan like an owl. (Mi 1:8)

Jeremiah announced the judgment of God that was impending, and then added:

Since my people are crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me. oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears I would weep day and night ... (Jr 8:21-9:1)

The prophets of the OT can also teach us to preach the message of God's law *explicitly*. What more earnest law proclamation could there be for an OT Israelite than to hear God say: "I'm going to bring the theocracy to an end"? "The kings who sit on David's throne, the priests, the prophets ... I will smash them one

against the other. ... I will allow no pity or mercy or compassion to keep me from destroying them” (Jr 3: f). All of us know from experience that, when preaching the law, to do no more than slap our hearers’ wrists. As we preach the law we actually blunt its cutting edge, perhaps with statements like: “Yes, God hates sin, but don’t forget he loves the sinner.” As though a righteous God can make that neat distinction between sin and sinner! You won’t hear the prophets say anything like that. Listen again to Jeremiah, speaking for God:

My inheritance has become to me like a lion in the forest. She roars at me; therefore I hate her. (Jr 12:8)

Or listen to Hosea:

Because of (the Israelites’) wickedness in Gilgal, I hated them there. Because of their sinful deeds, I will drive them out of my house. I will no longer love them. (Ho 9:15)

The prophets knew that (in the words of Dr. Walther): “We must preach people into hell before we can preach them into heaven” (*Law and Gospel* 118).

Since the prophets were accurate in assessing the evil nature of man, they were accurate also in offering the only solution to the problem of our sinful nature. The *gospel preached by the prophets* was *unconditional*, and it was *explicit*. Beginning with the very first gospel promise in Eden and down through the centuries and millennia of the Old Testament God made it clear that membership in his family, as well as a place at his side forever, would be awarded not on the basis of merit, but out of pure grace, through the work of the Messiah. He is the “Servant of the LORD,” who would *render perfect obedience to the Father*. “The Sovereign LORD has opened my ears, and I have not been rebellious,” Isaiah quotes the Messiah as saying. He would give his Father the perfect obedience he demanded, but never got, from us. And the prophets picture the Messiah as the one who would *intercept the fiery lightning bolts of God’s judgment* and absorb in his own body the judgment that should have condemned us forever to live without God.

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows ...

He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities ...

The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Is 53)

Although at Mt. Sinai God announced a covenant that did indeed carry a condition, yet the message from Sinai was never intended to be God’s last word to Israel or, for that matter, to the human race. Throughout the pages of the Old Testament, as of the New, God offers his grace *absolutely without condition*.

The beautiful Messianic prophecies, sprinkled liberally throughout the writings of the OT prophets, proclaim the saving gospel without any conditions. The prophets never say: “If you believe, God will send a Savior.” “When you repent, God will love you.” Many, if not most of the Messianic prophecies make use of the *Hebrew perfect*, a verb form which stresses completed action. We identify these as *prophetic perfects*, describing actions of God which, to the mind of the prophet, are *already done*, even though they may lie years in the future.

Nowhere in the books of the prophets is the contrast between the *conditional* covenant of the law and the *unconditional* new covenant of grace, God’s permanent contract with all people for all time, expressed more clearly than in Jeremiah 31:31-34

The time is coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel. This is the covenant I will make ... 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. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me ... For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.

80 years ago August Pieper commented: “The new covenant would consist in this, that God would write his law on the hearts and minds of people, giving himself to them as their God, thereby making them his people. This is *conversion*, regeneration, enlightenment. ... That is one half of the content of the new covenant. The other half is contained in the words: I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more’ — in other words, the forgiveness of sins. Both elements of the New Testament covenant of grace, renewal of the heart and *forgiveness* of sins (and life and salvation) are promised *without any condition*. It is precisely for that

reason — and only for that reason — that the new covenant is the exact opposite of the old covenant of law, for it promises grace, salvation, life now and life forever *absolutely without condition*” (*Quartalschrift* 7:196).

As the prophets of the OT preached *the law* explicitly, so they preached *the gospel* explicitly, absolutely without condition.

Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. (Is 43:1)

The punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. (Is 53:5)

I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness. (Jr 31:3)

Note those powerful indicatives. God attaches no condition to those promises. God’s new covenant is effective in saving people precisely for that reason, that it imposes no condition which the sinner must meet before the promise becomes effective.

It’s easy to talk about having sound doctrine, but not nearly so easy to accomplish it. The Old Testament prophets can vouch for the fact that it’s difficult to speak to God’s people of law and gospel *in the proper relation to each other*, and to *apply each correctly*. And yet we must do no less. Prof. Pieper reminds us: “Where there is a failing in this point of doctrine, there one cannot distinguish a Christian from a heathen or a Jew.” It’s not difficult to insert into our sermons a few phrases like “by the grace of God” or “for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ,” but I ought not imagine that by doing so I have preached the gospel explicitly. Calling upon people to “trust God” doesn’t make my sermon Lutheran, either. You could hear that in a Jewish synagog. And surely I have not done justice to the gospel context of my sermon text by being sure to include a few references to “our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” Mormons call him that, too. There’s a big difference between *proclaiming the gospel* and *preaching about the gospel*.

The march of prophecy, however, does not end with Malachi. The Talmud does not tell the whole truth when it says: “After Malachi, the spirit of prophecy departed from Israel.” The OT prophets realized that they were preliminary. Their big job was to prepare for another revelation God had for a sinful world.

Reference has been made to Deuteronomy 18:15. We see in that verse an immediate reference to the establishment in ancient Israel of a line of prophets, spokesmen for God. But having said this, we have not exhausted the prophecy. That prophecy refers to a line of prophets, to a historic institution, but it has reference to more than that. Moses performed the important task of founding the theocracy. That was, however, not the ultimate goal God had for the world. God wanted to bring his great good plan not only to the descendants of Abraham, but to a whole world of sinners, including non-Jews. That would require the work of one who was like Moses, but who was much greater than Moses. “God was going to raise up a body of prophets which was to find its supreme expression in one great prophet” (Young, *My Servants the Prophets* 33 )

Four centuries before BC became AD, God promised through the prophet Malachi: “*I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come.*” Four centuries later our Lord pointed to John the Baptist and announced: “This is the one about whom it is written: I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you” (Mt 11:10).

This is the man of whom Jesus also said: “Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Mt. 11:11). Our Lord is speaking of people being great not in terms of their personal sanctity, but of the uses to which he puts them. John was great because God used him to introduce the incarnate Son of God to the world. John never lived to see Jesus crucified and glorified. He lived to see the dawning of the gospel day, but his life was cut short before the noon of that day. You and I are greater than John in the same sense that a dwarf on a mountain can see farther than a giant in a valley.

John the Baptist was a called prophet of the Lord. His call is even dated for us; it came in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar. “The word of the Lord came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

A voice of one calling in the desert,

Prepare the way for the Lord” (Lk 3:2-4).

John’s prophetic message is summarized in the words: “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ... I testify that this is the Son of God” (Jn 1:29,34).

And so the stage was set for the fulfillment of prophecy. The prophets had foretold that this day of fulfillment would come. In Acts 10 we’re told that when Peter preached to the group assembled in Cornelius’ home he said: “*All the prophets testify about him* (Jesus) that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Ac 10:43). But we don’t have to take Peter’s word for this. On Easter Sunday afternoon Jesus told the Emmaus disciples: “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And then we’re told: “Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Lk 24:25-27).

Maybe you’ve already asked the question: “Did the prophets themselves always understand the full significance of what they were saying?” I don’t think we can answer that question fully, nor do we have to. St. Peter tells us: “Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow” (1 Pt 1: 10f). At times the OT writers understood much more of the significance of their words than we would probably have given them credit for. Peter tells us in his Pentecost sermon that the concluding words of Psalm 16 find their fulfillment in Christ’s resurrection, for *David* who uttered it “*was a prophet*” who saw “*what was ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ*” (Ac 2:30f). Pretty hard to harmonize that, isn’t it, with the historical-critical claim that “David was a creature of his day who could see no farther than the ideas of his contemporaries”?

In Jesus Christ God said all that he had to say to a sinful human race, all that he could say, all that there was to say. The epistle to the Hebrews begins with the striking attestation: “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, *but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son*” (He 1:1). There we have *apostolic* witness to Jesus as the last and great Prophet. On the Mount of Transfiguration we have the witness of *God the Father himself*: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him” (Mt 17: 5)!

Perhaps the most compelling testimony to Christ as God’s preeminent spokesman to the human race comes from the lips of *the Savior himself*. When Jesus preached, people said: “He speaks with authority.” And there was good reason for that authority. Jesus explained this to Nicodemus: “The one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard... For the one who God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit” (Jn 3:31-34).

From the first book of the New Testament to the last the truth is emphasized that *Jesus is God’s uttered truth for sinful mankind*. In the second of the seven visions recorded for us in the last book of the bible, St. John tells us that he saw a scroll in the hand of God, with writing on both sides, and sealed with seven seals. John wept until one of the elders said: “The Lion of the tribe of Judah ... is able to open the scroll and its seven seals” (Re 5:5) — in other words, to reveal and execute God’s will. Apart from Christ God’s sacred secrets cannot be known. That is Christ’s claim. He claims to speak authoritatively for God.

That is a claim which many refuse to acknowledge, and it’s not hard to understand why. C.S. Lewis says that Christ’s claim is so shocking that only two views of Jesus Christ are possible. “Either he was a raving lunatic — on a level with a man who says he is a poached egg — or else he was and is precisely what he said. There is no middle way. If the records make the first hypothesis unacceptable, you must submit to the second. And if you do that, all that is claimed by Christians becomes credible... You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not

come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

#### IV. PROPHECY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

We were reminded in our last session that prophecy reached its fulfillment in Christ. Whatever preceded that fulfillment was really preliminary— a prologue, if you will. What followed that fulfillment is, in a sense, epilogue. That’s what we want to trace in this segment, as we observe from the Scripture how the march of prophecy concluded.

With Malachi the exact succession of the OT prophets came to an end. It was, however, God’s will to give *another* testament presenting a new revelation of his will and depicting the most important events in all of history — the accomplishment of his great plan for rescuing a world of lost sinners. It would therefore be only natural to expect a *new era of prophecy* analogous to that of the OT. This new era of prophecy, prophecy in the New Testament, differed from the first era, the OT era, in two important respects. For one, it extended over a *much shorter period of time*. Secondly, it focused not on one single nation, but on the *development of the Church*.

Since the New Testament recognizes the Old Testament as the foundation for understanding the great events in the life of Christ, there are many references in the New Testament to Old Testament prophets. The New Testament frequently affirms *that OT prophecy is authoritative*. Referring to the OT, Peter wrote to the scattered Christians of Asia Minor: “Understand that no prophecy of the Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pt 1:20). The NT makes it very clear that the message of the OT prophets is authoritative and is binding on all people for all time.

When the NT quotes the Lord’s voice as uttered by the OT prophets, it often mentions the prophetic speakers by name. Referring to the slaughter of the innocents at Bethlehem, St. Matthew adds this comment: “Then what was said *through the prophet Jeremiah* was fulfilled: ‘A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning’” (Mt 2:17f). When he speaks of John the Baptist, St. Matthew writes: “This is he who was spoken of *through the prophet Isaiah*: ‘A voice of one calling in the desert...’” (Mt 3:3). More than a dozen similar instances could be cited in which NT writers mention OT writers by name, crediting them with speaking the authoritative word of God.

In just as many instances, however, the NT writers neglect to name the OT writer, choosing instead to identify the original writer only as “the prophet.” Recall that wicked King Herod asked Jerusalem’s Bible scholars where the promised Messiah was to be born. Again, let St. Matthew record the answer the scholars gave the king: “In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what *the prophet* has written: ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah...’” (Mt 2:5f). To escape the sword of Herod, Joseph was instructed to take the Christchild and his mother to Egypt. And so “according to St. Matthew, “was fulfilled what the Lord had said *through the prophet*: ‘Out of Egypt I called my son’” (Mt 2:15). In such cases the identity of the prophet can be known only from the context. The reader is simply expected to know which prophet is meant.

In still other instances the NT writers, when quoting the OT prophetic writings, will simply lump the prophets into a single category. Again, let St. Matthew illustrate. “Joseph withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said *through the prophets*: ‘He will be called a Nazarene’” (Mt 2:22f). The point is this: whether the NT writers identify the OT prophet *by name*, or *by quotation*, or *by the title of his office*, they affirm that the OT prophetic writings are authoritative also in the NT era. The messages which God transmitted through the prophets of the OT did not lose their divine authority just by virtue of the fact that in the fullness of the time BC became AD.

As we trace the march of prophecy still further into the era of the New Testament, we see additional evidence that God stood behind the proclamation of his word. As his little band of faithful followers testified to the truth of God in an unfriendly and unbelieving world, *God granted the gift of predictive prophecy*, as a

special charismatic gift. On the pages of the New Testament there are numerous instances where *prophecy* is synonymous with *predicting future events*, with *foretelling*. A couple examples.

Luke 1:67ff: “His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit *and prophesied...*” And thereupon follows the song we know as the *Benedictus*. This song was really beyond Zechariah. It was put on his lips by divine revelation. In the birth of his son he saw evidence that the God of Israel had “come and redeemed his people ... to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham...” Then, looking at the infant in his arms, Zechariah predicted: “And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.”

During one of the last conversations Jesus had with his disciples Maundy Thursday evening, he promised them that after his departure the Holy Spirit would reveal further information about God’s plans for the future. “He will declare to you the things that are to come,” Jesus assured them (Jn 16:13). Some of this advance information would be *good* news, some would be *bad* news, but all of it was designed to strengthen that loyal little band. Under God, they had critically important roles to play in *preserving* the truths of Christianity and in *transmitting* them to future generations of God’s people.

The pages of the New Testament provide several examples of how the Spirit of God enabled the infant church to engage in predictive prophecy. After Saul’s conversion, during the year Barnabas spent with him at Antioch, “some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world” (Ac 11:27f). Why should the Holy Spirit have had Agabus predict a famine? The following verses supply the answer: “The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul” (Ac 11: 29f). It’s clear that the Holy Spirit granted the gift of predictive prophecy to the infant church as a special charismatic gift, to equip them for doing the work he had called them to do.

We meet Agabus once more, at the end of Paul’s third missionary journey. We’re told Agabus came down from Jerusalem to meet Paul at Caesarea, on the Mediterranean coast. St. Luke picks up the story.

(Agabus) took Paul’s belt, tied his own hands and feet with it, and said, “The Holy Spirit says, ‘In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles’” (Ac 21:11).

Like the OT prophets, Agabus reinforced his message by symbolic action.

The last piece of evidence which the New Testament supplies to illustrate how God granted his infant church the gift of predictive prophecy as a special charismatic gift is found in the last book of the New Testament. In the opening chapter of Revelation, St. John characterizes his work as “the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servant *what must soon take place*. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy...” (Re 1:3). In charting the march of prophecy through the New Testament, we dare not fail to note that a significant development is God’s gift of *predictive prophecy*.

By far the most common New Testament use of the verb to “prophesy,” however, is to describe the Spirit’s gift of *preaching the revealed truth of God*. In contrast to the gift of predictive prophecy, or foretelling, this is *forthtelling*.

St. Paul speaks of this in Romans 12. “We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith” (Ro 12:6). Prophecy, then, is a *charisma*, a grace-gift given by the Spirit to members of the early Church, to be used in a way that expresses and maintains the unity of the one Body. It was surely such a charismatic gift that enabled Peter, who had presented such a pitiful spectacle in front of a coal fire only weeks earlier, to preach his Pentecost sermon as boldly as he did, and to face hostile opposition as fearlessly as he did.

How did the New Testament prophets get the message they prophesied? Peter gives us a partial answer when he writes: “Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pt 1:19). Before leaving his disciples Jesus promised them: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses” (Ac 1:8). The question, however, remains: “How did the Spirit channel to the NT prophets the message he wanted them to transmit?”

He did that in one of two ways. Paul urged his young coworker Timothy: “Preach the Word” (2 Ti 4:2). “To the law and to the testimony!” Isaiah urged the people of Judah. “If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn” (Is. 8:20). In the NT Church, men are called prophets when they preach messages which they have received *from a careful study of the word of God*.

In the early years of the Christian Church prophets often received the messages they were to transmit by *direct revelation* from God. This is another of those charismatic gifts with which the Spirit of God endowed the Church during the period of her infancy. “We have different gifts, according to the grace given us,” Paul wrote to the Roman Christians. “If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith” (Ro 12:6). In treating the subject of spiritual gifts (*charismata*) in his Bible study, *God’s Gifted People*, David Valleskey distinguishes between *foundational* gifts and *confirmatory* gifts. Prophesying belongs in the former group. He distinguishes also between *speaking* gifts and *serving* gifts; again, prophesying belongs among the former. Certain members of the Body of Christ were enabled to speak the truth which the Spirit had given them by direct revelation. These were special gifts for the early church before the New Testament was completed. Under the direct and immediate inspiration of the Spirit, the person prophesying exhorted and strengthened the Christian community by pastoral guidance and instruction, and witnessed to the character of the living Lord. ‘Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt, “Paul encouraged the Thessalonians (1 Th 5: 19f). And to the Corinthians wrote: “Eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy” (1 Co 14:1)! In other words, appreciate the gift of prophecy!

These words of St. Paul emphasize that prophesying, speaking to edify the Church, was *an important gift* of the Spirit. Paul assigns prophecy a key role in building up God’s people.

Paul discusses this gift at considerable length in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14, and for good reason. In Corinth (as perhaps also in other congregations) there was a fairly well-defined circle of recognized prophets (1 Co 14:29-33). It served a pastoral function, offering guidance and instruction to those inside of the family of God, as well as to those outside of it. Whereas only an apostle could exercise apostolic authority, anyone with the *charisma* of prophecy might prophesy —some no doubt regularly, some only occasionally.

But, as our friend Martin Luther has pointed out, “Where God builds his church, Satan will build a chapel next door.” Trouble arose in the Corinthian congregation when Satan led some of the members to abuse the Spirit’s speaking gifts. He persuaded some of the Corinthians to think that *glossolalia*, speaking in an unknown tongue, was the best gift of all, the real mark of genuine prophetic utterance.

Paul had to confront this mistaken notion. He therefore sharply criticized irresponsible speaking at worship services which showed little concern for those on the fringe and for those outside of the family of God. He showed little sympathy with those who found an unholy satisfaction in being able to speak in an unknown language and who consequently left the visitor at services feeling hopelessly on the outside. When Paul enumerates spiritual gifts (1 Co 12:8-10, 28-30), *glossolalia* (and its interpretation) are mentioned dead *last*.

While de-emphasizing tongues-speaking, Paul emphasized the importance of prophecy. “Follow the way of love, and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit. But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.... Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? ... Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.... Brothers, stop thinking like children” (1 Co 14:1-4, 9, 12, 20).

A related problem in the Corinthian worship services was that even some of those who possessed the charismatic gift of prophecy were using it without consideration for others. Paul felt constrained to remind

them: “Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged ... For God is not a God of disorder” (1 Co 14:29-33).

Both the Old Testament and the New emphasize that the gift of prophecy is *a gift that the Spirit bestows on men and women*. After God had led the people of Israel through the Red Sea, “Miriam the prophetess, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her, with tambourines and dancing. Miriam sang to them

Sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted.

The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea’ (Ex 15:20f).

At the time of the Judges Deborah, a prophetess, exercised her gift of prophecy. Judges 5 records a song she and Barak sang when God granted Israel a smashing victory over the forces of Sisera.

About 35 years before Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, during the reign of good King Josiah, the Book of the Law was discovered in the house of the LORD, which was being repaired and restored after being shamefully neglected for years. When Josiah heard the message of that book, he ordered his officials: “Inquire of the LORD for me and for the people and for all Judah ... because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book” (2 Kg 22:13). Hilkiah the priest went to Huldah the prophetess, who gave him the prophetic message: “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel says: ‘I am going to bring disaster on this place and its people ... because they have forsaken me ... and provoked me to anger by all the idols their hands have made’” (2 Kg 22: 15-17).

The prophet Joel, “the prophet of Pentecost,” had foretold that the Spirit’s blessing of prophecy would be given to men and women:

I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit. (Jl 2:28f).

On the pages of the New Testament we meet Anna, one of the people who met the Christchild when he was brought to the temple. She is called “a prophetess.” With eyes opened by the Holy Spirit she saw in Jesus what most Israelites did not and would not see: the great Ransomer, who would pay the ransom to release Jerusalem (used figuratively for the people of God) from her spiritual bondage. And with lips opened by the Spirit Anna “gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem” (Lk 2:38).

St. Luke also reports that, thirty years later, when Paul reached Caesarea at the conclusion of his third missionary journey he stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, who “had four unmarried daughters who prophesied” (Ac 21:9). It is clear, then, whether we’re talking about the OT or the NT, the Spirit of God did not discriminate by sex when he distributed his special gifts of prophecy.

St. Paul helps us to see one more feature about the Spirit’s gift of prophecy that ought to be noted here. Important as prophecy was for the life and upbuilding of the Christian church, *the gift was limited, as well as temporary*. Listen to St. Paul speak to the Corinthians: “Where there are prophecies, they will cease.... We know in part, and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears” (I Co 13:8-10). At Christ’s second coming “that which is perfect” will come; then we’ll see face to face and know with complete clarity and certainty. Then there’ll be no need for prophecy, and prophecy will cease.

Unfortunately, however, it was not only prophets and apostles who saw what a good thing the Church had going for itself in the Spirit’s gift of prophecy. Satan realized that, too, and during the period of the NT, as always, he created his counterfeit: *false prophets*.

Jesus warned his disciples: “Many false prophets will appear ... and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible” (Mt 24:11,24). Evidence for the truthfulness of Christ’s words is scattered all across the pages of the NT. “The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits” (Ac 23:5). Paul had to warn Timothy against the likes of Hymenaeus and Philetus, “who have wandered from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place” (namely, in



conversion) “and they destroy the faith of some” (2 Ti 2:18). Speaking by the gift of prophecy, St. Peter warned his readers: “There were false prophets ... just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them, bringing swift destruction on themselves” (2 Pt 2: 1).

Satan has his agents even in the established church. It’s a matter of record that the people who caused Jesus the most grief were the top church people. After Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, it was the Jewish high priest, no less, who advised his fellow members of the Sanhedrin that it would be for the good of the nation if they could somehow manage to put the Carpenter-teacher from Nazareth out of the way. If they didn’t, his Messianic movement would erupt in violence, and the Romans would step in with a heavy foot and a heavy fist, and that would be the end of any hope for an independent Israel. Resplendent in his robes of blue and white, Caiaphas offered the advice: “It is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.”(Jn 11:51). St. John helps us to see that the Spirit of God overruled Caiaphas’ evil intent and even used him to proclaim a truth which is at the very heart of the Christian religion. I hope you won’t think it’s a cheap shot if I suggest that this is the second time the Scripture records that God spoke through a donkey. I think it was Luther who once said: “You can crown an ass with laurel leaves, but his ears will always spoil the effect. “

There is good reason for the frequent admonition to NT Christians: “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but *test the spirits* whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 Jn 4:1). It’s comforting for us who live in this late hour of the world’s history, in an age of apostasy, to note that God not only *directs* us to “test the spirits,” but *equips* us to do this. One of the charismatic gifts the Spirit of God has given his church is the ability to distinguish between what is false teaching and what is true.

In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul gives us one of his listings of the charismatic gifts with which the Holy Spirit endows his church. There he writes: “To each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit ... to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, *to another distinguishing between spirits*” (1 Co 12:7-10). Although the ability to distinguish between God’s truth and false doctrine may not be a gift possessed by every Christian, it is a *charisma* which is present in the church; God will see to that. God has not called us to be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men who claim to be sent by God with an inspired message. As a result, God’s people are not at the mercy of the deceiver whom Jesus calls the “father of lies.”

All right; we’ve reached the end of our march. We have followed the march of prophecy from its beginnings on the early pages of the Old Testament to its fulfillment in Christ and its subsequent development in the Christian Church. In place of the OT prophets and a partial Bible, we have the full OT and NT Scriptures. We no longer need those charismatic gifts which have been called “foundational,” gifts that were so valuable when the Christian Church was establishing itself (gifts like the prophets and apostles themselves).

Does this mean that, standing at the end of the march of prophecy, we know everything there is to be known about God and our relationship to him? No. It means only that in every age God gives his people all they need to live lives of faith and love, confident that God’s good will for them is being done. God’s revelation to his NT children, just as his revelation to his first children on this planet, is not complete. St. Paul’s words applied to Adam and Eve as well as they apply to us: “We know in part, and we prophesy in part” (1 Co 13:9).

There is not a single part of God’s revelation where he has told us the entire truth, the truth as he knows it. Prof. John Schaller wrote an article for the *Quartalschrift* 75 years ago in which he made the statement: “Although God has revealed to us much about himself, *he remains everywhere a hidden God*, whose thoughts we can only repeat after him, and only to the extent he has expressed these thoughts in the first place.” (Read the whole article some time. It’s been translated under the title “The Hidden God.” You can find it in the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Volume 71, pages 185-202).

On the one hand, God has not told us everything. But, on the other hand, he has not left us in doubt. Luther once made the statement: “There is no more miserable frame of mind than doubt.” We may not know

everything, but the Author of all knowledge and of all prophecy has enabled us to say with Paul: “*I know* whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day” (2 Ti 1:12). If you and I can say that, we know all we need to know.

## V. PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETING THE PROPHETIC MESSAGE

To many Christians, the last third of the OT is pretty much a closed book. Apart from some golden chapters (like Isaiah 53), some dearly-loved narratives (like Daniel in the lions’ den), and scattered Messianic prophecies (which they once memorized for children’s Christmas Eve services) Isaiah through Malachi is pretty much unfamiliar territory for such folks. Listen to Luther describe the impression made by the recorded words of the prophets on the average person: “The prophets seem to have a queer way of talking, like people who instead of proceeding in an orderly manner, ramble off from one thing to the next, so that you cannot make head or tail of them or see what they are getting at.” (To be fair to Luther, remember that he’s describing not the prophetic message but the perception people have of the prophets).

Jeremiah 36 brings us the unhappy account of how God told Jeremiah to write down the prophetic messages he had delivered over a quarter-century of ministry, and of how wicked King Jehoiakim tried to destroy Jeremiah’s prophetic scroll. He ordered that it be brought to the palace and read to him. After three or four columns of the scroll had been read, the king would cut them off with a knife and throw them into a firepot, until the entire scroll was consumed in the fire. Now we know God overruled the king’s wicked intent and had Jeremiah rewrite his prophecy. But just for purposes of discussion: if the wicked king had succeeded in destroying the book of Jeremiah for posterity, how much of a loss would the average member of your congregation feel? Is it possible that he would say: “Well, I don’t understand the prophecy of Jeremiah anyway, so I’m really not out all that much?”

As we this afternoon conclude our survey of *The March of Prophecy*, it seems appropriate that we spend some time addressing some questions. The Lord expended considerable effort to have the prophetic message put down in writing and making sure that record was transmitted to us. *What were his intentions* in giving us that record? *How are we to understand* that prophetic message? *What are some guidelines for interpreting* the message of the prophets? The following listing is not intended to be exhaustive, but perhaps it may be helpful.

***The prophetic word must be understood in the light of its historical context.*** The words of the prophets are not like individual gemstones, or cameos, each to be admired for itself, all by itself. Each prophetic word was spoken in a definite and distinctive historical context. To divorce the passage from its context is to do violence to the Scripture.

As an example take Isaiah 7, the chapter that contains the beautiful prophecy which informs us that the mother of the Savior would be a virgin. I have no doubt that many a pious and spiritually profitable Christmas sermon has been preached on Isaiah 7:14 which focused totally on the Christchild and the miracle of his virgin birth. But is that preaching Isaiah 7: 14 in the light of its historical context? What does the context add to our understanding of that prophecy?

I submit that God’s message in Isaiah 7:14, a prophecy God directed to Judah’s King Ahaz, cannot be properly understood without knowing some facts about Ahaz’s record as king of Judah. When we check out 2 Kings 16 and 2 Chronicles 28, we learn he was a wicked king. He practiced idolatry, specifically the filthy rituals of Baal worship (an unholy combination of idolatry plus adultery). Ahaz actually offered up his own son as a human sacrifice to his pagan deities. “He offered sacrifices to the gods of Damascus, who had defeated him; for he thought, ‘Since the gods of the kings of Aram have helped them, I will sacrifice to them so they will help me’ (2 Chr 28:23). Remember we’re talking about the king of Judah, the man appointed by God to be the defender of his people, as well as the defender of the faith. This evil man even “shut the doors of the LORD’s temple and ...provoked the LORD to anger” (2 Chr 28:24). And he had sixteen years (the equivalent of four presidential terms) to do his mischief! The prophecy of the virgin birth was originally spoken to him.

To call this haughty idolater to his senses, God let the armies of two powerful northern neighbors invade the land of Judah, saying: “Let us invade Judah; let us tear it apart and divide it among ourselves, and make the son of Tabeel king over it” (Is 7:6). We don’t know who Tabeel was, but it’s clear that the enemies’ evil plan was to overthrow the royal house of David, the ancestor of the Savior. To call King Ahaz to repentance, God then sent the prophet Isaiah to him with the assurance: “Don’t be afraid of those two invading kings. Their plans will not succeed.” And to assure the king still more, God invited Ahaz: “Ask the LORD for a sign, visible evidence that he’ll keep his promise to rout the invading kings and rescue Jerusalem.” Imagine! Ahaz could name the miraculous sign he wanted to see—either in the earth beneath (say, an earthquake) or in the heavens above (perhaps an eclipse). When the king, with a show of piety, refused to ask for a sign, the LORD was angry, and said in effect: “All right! In mercy I offered you sign of my grace, and you refused it. Now I’m going to give you a sign, whether you want it or not. But the sign, which was to have been *evidence of my grace*, will now be a sign *announcing judgment* on your unbelief!

There is a strong note of judgment which underlies Isaiah’s prophecy of the virgin birth, just as the Christmas message has a strong note of judgment for the person who rejects God’s mercy. This important emphasis will, however, be lost on the person who fails to understand the prophetic word in its historical context.

As we strive to interpret the prophetic message properly, there are two extremes in contemporary OT scholarship that we want consistently to avoid. One of these extreme views says: since no one can predict the future, the prophets spoke *only to their time*. The opposing view, equally unacceptable, argues: the prophets were not all that concerned about their own time; their message contains a detailed blueprint *for all time*.

Orthodox OT scholarship has long recognized that this is not an *either/or* proposition, but rather a *both/and*. Our second guideline, then is ***that the prophetic word often had more than a single point of reference***.

A couple examples. 2 Samuel 7: 12ff records the prophecy the prophet Nathan brought to King David: “When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.” Who is the son of David to whom Nathan was referring? Solomon understood the statement about building the LORD’s house to refer to himself. When he later became king, he announced: “I intend to build a temple for the Name of the LORD my God, *as the LORD told my father David*, when he said, ‘Your son whom I will put on the throne in your place will build the temple for my Name’ (1 Kg 5:5).

When David heard Nathan’s prophecy, however, he recognized that the prophetic word “I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” pointed to a descendant who would far outshine Solomon. We know that from Psalm 72, where David describes that Descendant in greater detail: “He will endure as long as the sun, as long as the moon, through all generations.... He will rule from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.... All kings will bow down to him, and all nations will serve m... All nations will be blessed through him, and they will call him blessed. When God put the prophetic utterance in a specific historical context he did not necessarily intend that its meaning was to be exhausted in a single historical situation. Nathan’s prophecy to David found its *intermediate fulfillment* in Solomon, its *final fulfillment* in Christ.

When God called Isaiah to be his prophet to an apostate Judah, he told him: “Go and tell this people: ‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’ Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed” (Is 6:9f).

This prophecy was *first fulfilled in the ministry* of Isaiah. His preaching served to harden the people of Judah in their unbelief. Indeed, that was God’s answer to Judah’s unbelief. He who refused to hear the word in repentance and faith had to continue to hear the word from Isaiah’s lips. But the word he refused to hear for his salvation he now had to hear for his condemnation. Seven centuries after the time of Isaiah St. Matthew tells us that this prophecy was *fulfilled in Jesus’ ministry* (Mt 13:14f). But we’re still not through with that prophecy.

When Paul was in Rome, and some of his Jewish hearers resisted and rejected his preaching, we're told in just so many words that Isaiah's prophecy was *fulfilled in Paul's ministry* (Ac 28:26f). Which fulfillment is the correct, the authentic one? The prophecy was fulfilled on all three occasions.

During Jeremiah's prophetic ministry the first contingents of citizens of Judah were deported to Babylon as exiles. They were taken to Ramah, a border town five miles north of Jerusalem, where they were gathered into groups and sent off into captivity. At that time Jeremiah heard Rachel, mother of the race, weeping for her children, who were going into exile, most likely never to be heard from again, and he wrote: "A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more" (Jer 31:15). Six centuries later the evangelist Matthew once again heard the mother of the race weeping, this time when Bethlehem's infants were put to death by Herod's sword. Matthew tells us: "Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: 'A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more'" (Mt 2:15). A principle, therefore, that we'll want to remember when interpreting prophecy is: ***the prophetic word often had more than a single point of reference.***

All of us, I suspect, have on occasion been irritated when we hear one of the neo-Evangelicals argue that the nation of Israel has a rightful claim to the territory formerly called Palestine because "God once promised that land to the descendants of Abraham, and God cannot go back on his word." The person who makes that statement has forgotten that another of the principles for interpreting prophecy is that ***some prophecies are conditional.***

Many of the promises God made to ancient Israel included an "if" clause. *If* the predicted circumstances are present, such and such will come to pass; *if* they're not, then it won't. Moses made that very clear in his farewell address to the people of Israel. Listen to his words: "I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse—the blessing *if you obey* the commands of the LORD your God ... the curse *if you disobey* the commands of the LORD your God ... by following other gods" (Dt 11:26-28). In Deuteronomy 28 Moses even spelled out what the respective blessings and curses would be. "If you fully obey the LORD your God ... *all these blessings* will come upon you: You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country.... The LORD will grant you abundant prosperity—in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your ground—in the land he swore to your forefathers to give you" (Dt 28:1.3.11).

In that same address, however, Moses also showed Israel the flip side of that coin. "If, however, you do not obey the LORD your God ... *all these curses* will come upon you: You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country....The LORD will cause you to be defeated before your enemies....The LORD will drive you and the king you set over you to a nation unknown to you or your fathers. There you will worship other gods, gods of wood and stone....You will become a thing of horror and an object of scorn and ridicule to all the nations where the LORD will drive you.... Just as it pleased the LORD to make you prosper and increase in number, so it will please him to ruin and destroy you. You will be uprooted from the land you are entering to possess" (Dt 28: 15f.25.36f.63).

Some prophecies are clearly conditional. In Jeremiah's Parable of the Potter (Jer 18: 1-12) the LORD said to his people: "If I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and *if that nation repents* of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and *if it does evil* in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it."

Jonah's prophecy to the people of Nineveh, "Forty more days, and Nineveh will be destroyed" (Jon 3:4) implied a condition. Jonah must have known that implicit in his words was the condition: "...Nineveh will be destroyed *if the Ninevites don't repent.*" If God's statement was *not* conditional, then it was an idle threat, which did not come true. Nineveh was not destroyed forty days later.

It's in the very nature of things that OT prophecy had to be conditional, because it was written primarily for people who were still under the Sinaitic covenant, and that covenant promised blessings that were contingent on the people's behavior. By contrast, Israel's disobedience would forfeit those blessings. Do you

remember how Ezra addressed the problem arising out of the fact that many of the returning exiles had married Canaanite wives (Ezr 9-10)? He ordered them to dismiss those wives and annulled those marriages. Under the Sinaitic law code, marriage to a Canaanite was a prohibited degree of marriage. For the sake of contrast let it be added, however, that when the Lord's prophets spoke to the believing remnant about forgiveness, the beautiful promises are completely unconditional.

All of us have been disturbed by the fact that millennialist televangelists are bending the ears of our people with detailed scenarios of the course human history will take as the world winds down. Even seeing their precise predictions go unfulfilled hasn't stopped them from outlining exactly what the events will be preceding the second coming of Christ. All of which is by way of introducing another principle for interpreting OT prophecy: *the prophetic word may never be interpreted in such a way as to contradict a clear passage of the Scripture.*

According to Billy Graham, the battle of Armageddon will be followed by the 1000 year reign of Christ, during which "political confusion will be turned to order and harmony, social injustices will be abolished, and moral corruption will be replaced by integrity. For the first time in history the whole world will know what it is like to live in a society governed by God's principles, and Satan's influence will not be present to hinder world progress toward peace, unity, equality and justice. Man's dream for global harmony will be realized." (W. Martin, *A Prophet With Honor* 578). Or listen to how *The Living Bible* translates Isaiah 2:3-4: "In those days the world will be ruled from Jerusalem. The Lord will settle international disputes; all the nations will convert their weapons of war into implements of peace. Then at the last all wars will stop and all military training will end."

How does this peaceful scenario of the last days compare with Christ's prediction of the last days? When the Messiah is pictured as the one who will bring social and political peace on earth, remember his words: "Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. There will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three" (Lk 12: 51f). In answer to his disciples' question: "What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" Jesus painted a picture of what lies ahead which differs sharply from the pretty prediction of the millennialist. "You will hear of wars and rumors of wars. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.... Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold ... and then the end will come" (Mt 24:6ff).

Someone might ask: "But don't Isaiah and Micah predict that men will beat their swords into plowshares? If that doesn't point to a period of universal peace on earth, what does it mean?" A corollary to the principle that *the prophetic word may never be interpreted in such a way as to contradict a clear Scripture passage* is the hermeneutical principle that *figurative language must be recognized as such and interpreted accordingly.*

Usually this is not difficult. When Christ calls himself the vine and us the branches, nobody has difficulty recognizing that as figurative. When God told ancient Israel: "I brought you up out of Egypt on eagles' wings," nobody thinks that means God flew a squadron of eagles down there to rescue his people. The opening verses of Isaiah 11 describe the Messianic age. "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit." We take that figuratively. The stump is the royal house of David—once a mighty tree, but now cut down by the axe of God's judgment. The shoot from the decaying stump of Jesse is Christ. His Messianic activity is described as rebuking unbelief, defeating the enemies of his people, and rescuing his people. The prophecy places us squarely in the Messianic age.

The prophecy now proceeds to describe the results of Messiah's Savior-work. "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.... the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest" (Is 11:6-9). Are we to conclude from this that in the Messianic age the lion will be transformed from a carnivore into a vegetarian? If I give a *figurative* meaning to what is to be understood *literally*, I distort its meaning. The reverse is also true. If I give a *literal* meaning to what is to be understood *figuratively*, I distort its meaning. Isaiah is clearly describing the perfect peace the Messiah comes

to bring. The peace to which he refers is the same peace which the Christmas angel announced to the shepherds: “Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.”

When God through the prophets taught his people the great truths of redemption, he did not choose to reveal all the details of the sequence of events as he worked out his great good plan. The arrangement of prophetic predictions is more logical than chronological. Another principle of interpreting the prophetic message, therefore, must be: ***the prophetic word can often be understood only when viewed from the prophet’s perspective.***

You recall how Jesus responded to the disciples’ question about the signs of his coming and of the end of the age. He refrained from giving a precise forecast. Instead he spoke first about conditions *at the time Jerusalem would fall* to the Romans. (He said things like “Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house” and “How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers”) From there Jesus’ answer moved imperceptibly to describing conditions *at the time of his return to judgment*. (He said things like “For the sake of the elect those days will be shortened”). The point is: Jesus left the line between the fall of Jerusalem and the end of the world indistinct. When the prophets do the same thing, we call it ***prophetic perspective.***

The prophets often looked into the future to predict the judgment God would bring on the enemies of his people. But often this *more immediate* judgment is coupled with the *more distant* judgment to be announced on Judgment Day. God’s deliverance of his people from the Babylonian exile may be linked in the prophetic vision with God’s final deliverance of his people from all evil. Those of you who have visited Denver will recall looking to the west and seeing the Rocky Mountains. Nearest to you is the front range, and you could estimate fairly accurately how far away that first range of mountains is. But behind that front range you saw a second range of mountains, and still another beyond that. But there your depth perception was shot. You had no way of telling how far away from the first range that second one was, and the third one beyond that. The prophet Joel (2:28-32) predicted the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, a prophecy which Peter asserts was fulfilled on the first Pentecost. Joel’s exact words were “I will pour out my Spirit in those days.” Now note how Joel’s prophecy continued: “I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD” (2:30f). In the context of a prophecy of God’s outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost is a clear reference to God’s return on Judgment Day.

For us this constitutes a problem. Two thousand years have already elapsed between those two mighty acts in the drama of our salvation. How can they be linked? But from Joel’s vantage point, that was no problem. From his perspective he looked into the distant future and, with eyes opened by the Spirit, saw two monumental events in God’s saving plan. He described them without reference to chronological sequence. ***The prophetic word can often be understood only when viewed from the prophet’s perspective.***

A seventh and one of the most important guidelines for understanding and interpreting the prophetic message is that ***the prophets pointed forward to Christ.*** It will be immediately obvious that here we part company not only with Jewish interpreters, but also with OT scholars committed to the historical-critical method of Bible interpretation. For us this seventh guideline is so fundamental that it really requires little elaboration.

We have *apostolic testimony* for this. Referring to Jesus, Peter told Cornelius: “All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”(Ac 10:43). In his first epistle Peter states that the prophetic writings “predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow” (1 Pt 1:10). The most compelling testimony, however, that ***the prophets pointed forward to Christ*** is that which comes from the lips of *our Lord himself*. On Easter Sunday afternoon he rebuked the Emmaus disciples for being so slow to believe what the prophets had spoken. “Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” he asked. “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Lk 24: 26f).

In the prophets of Israel, therefore, we see a phenomenon which has no equal, no parallel anywhere in the world. Here were men and women whom God raised up and equipped. As a result of the Spirit's call and the Spirit's gifts, these men and women recognized the amazing plan of rescue God had designed, to be carried out through the life and death of Jesus Christ. From century to century they saw with increasing clarity, and they described in greater detail...

...that God is a God of perfect holiness, who cannot and will not tolerate sin but must turn from it by an awful act of judgment

...that God is at the same time a God whose big heart yearns to restore fallen mankind to friendship and fellowship with himself

...that the only solution to the problem of satisfying the demands of God's perfect holiness as well as the demands of God's loving heart was the *principle of substitution*.

The prophets saw the Messiah—of the seed of Abraham, the Lion from the tribe of Judah, great David's greater Son, virgin-born yet the mighty God—as the one who would exchange places with sinners under the judgment of God. He would be the obedient Servant, who would take the sinner's place under the righteous demands of God. He would also be the suffering Servant, who would take the sinner's place under the righteous judgment of God.

This is what it means to approach the study of the Old Testament from the presuppositions of faith. To approach it from any other presupposition is to make of the Old Testament no more than a good book, a pious piece of early Jewish literature.

A final principle for interpreting the prophetic message which the interpreter ought to remember is that *the prophetic word is often mysterious*. Daniel 10 and 11 record the last in a series of four visions which the Lord granted Daniel, showing him in considerable detail that the future held tragedy as well as triumph for the people of God. Daniel didn't understand all of what he was being permitted to see, and he asked for clarification. "My lord, what will the outcome of all this be?" (Dn 12:9) he asked.

Now note the answer he got. "Go your way, Daniel, because the words are closed up and sealed until the time of the end." The language of prophecy is sometimes vague and mysterious. If God has not given us the key to understanding a specific segment of prophecy, we can be happy not to know. And then it's better to shut our mouths than to try to speak about what we don't understand. God's entire revelation will be understood completely only when the events prophesied actually take place. In the meantime, if God chooses to remain hidden, we will do well to let him remain hidden.

And with that we come to the end of our survey of the March of Prophecy. As from week to week we heard the voices of Israel's prophets speaking to us, I hope the conviction grew on all of us that the prophetic message is one which God's people today need to hear. The men and women and children we serve need to sink their roots more deeply into Old Testament soil. If that is to happen you and I, God's agricultural agents, need to read and reread the prophetic message, not just for sermon preparation, but for our own spiritual life and well-being.

One of your young brothers out there in the trenches told me not long ago: "The ministry today is so tough that if I didn't have a couple hours every day for private meditation I don't think I could make it." You can identify with that young pastor, can't you? When an unbelieving world belittles the Savior you love and demeans the faith you hold dear, when even within the fellowship of Christians your authority is questioned or your advice is not followed, when your best efforts seem ineffective and little appreciated, how easy it is to become defensive, or discouraged, and to lose the joy of the ministry. How important, how absolutely crucial it is at a time like that to have God assure you of your status. How valuable it is at a time like that to hear again, as if for the first time, what God said to Elijah under similar circumstances, or to Amos, or to Hosea, or to Habakkuk, or to God not only *assured them of their status* as dearly loved members of his family. Through his word also *equipped them for their important role* in his plan for his people. Through the prophetic message God will do the same for you and me today.