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Practical Prophecy

Dylan C. Halter

Bible 105: Old Testament Survey

May 8th, 2017

Prophets of the Old Testament provided the nation of Israel a direct line of communication with the Lord. Their job was to edify the nation, keeping their praise towards the Creator. However, Israel began to pull away from the Lord during the reign of the kings and the ensuing civil war. Their disobedience would continue through the post-exilic moments following the Babylonian invasion through idolatry, social injustice, and religious ritualism. Today, the Old Testament prophets speak to the same situations. This lethal triad transcends time and provides believers, both Jew and Gentile, an opportunity for repentance, redirection, and rededication to Yahweh.

Idolatry

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod 20:2-3).¹ The very first commandment given was a statement against idolatry. Most would agree that idolatry is the root of all sin.² It can be associated with three elements, which cause humanity to stumble; these are moral failures, abominable acts, such as child sacrifice, and materialistic reliance on security and prosperity via wealth or military power.³ Often in the Old Testament, idolatry is associated with promiscuity, adultery, and lust against the marital union with God (Jer 13:26-29).⁴ Idolatry breaks the person and demolishes a relationship with the Divine. The prophet Jeremiah provided insight into these detestable practices.

¹ All Bible verses are translated in the New International Version, unless otherwise noted.

² Daniel L. Akin, *A Theology for the Church*, (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014).

³ McConville, J. G. and Mark J. Boda. *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*. IVP Academic, 2012. IVP Bible Dictionary Series. EBSCOhost.

⁴Ibid.

The book of Jeremiah explains the struggle for Judah's loyalty with the LORD against false gods by prophesying the destructive consequences.⁵ The LORD speaks through Jeremiah explaining the adulterous acts of Israel (Jer 3:6). Instead of demanding punishment for their wickedness, the Lord asks that they acknowledge their guilt and to return to their "husband," Yahweh (3:13-14). If the nation would not repent, the ensuing military invasion from a powerful northern enemy would be Israel's demise.⁶ One important realization of this prophecy is how the LORD gives Israel a chance to turn from their ways, as the Psalmist says, "The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love" (Ps 103:8). Much like then, people today are given commandments through God's Word to obey. Simultaneously, they can either chose to keep His decrees or stray from them. Because the LORD is never changing (Mal 3:6), His anger against sinful activities is slow and patient, waiting for the idolatrous hearts of the present to change. Idolatry is no different today in principle, just different in practice.

Ezekiel, whose name means "God strengthens," also provides insightful dealings with idolatry. His focus was primarily on the people's worship of engraved images of gods in the temple.⁷ The prophet of God provides the problem, and then the punishment with idolatry in the temple. In a vision, Ezekiel stands in the glory of God (Ezek 8:4). The Lord speaks, pointing Ezekiel to look upon an altar with an idol of jealousy (8:5), and explains how more detestable things will be seen (8:6). Ezekiel is shown the temple markings, which are etched depictions of crawling animals and unclean animals, with all the idols of Israel within the temple (8:10). After Ezekiel exits the temple, he is brought to the inner courtyard, where twenty-five men are

⁵ Ed Hindson, *The Essence of the Old Testament: A Survey* (Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Publishing Group, 2015).

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

worshipping the sun god, bowing towards the east (8:16). Following the abomination that Ezekiel saw, Yahweh loudly proclaims His judgment against those who sinned by departing from the temple (9:3), allowing men to destroy the people in the city (9:5-6) and to destroy everything within the temple (9:7). The interesting caveat to the destruction brought about from the Lord was the self-inflicting wounds from idolatrous Israel. One seemingly big problem for Christianity is suffering. While bad things sometimes happen to good people, often people are subject to the field they sow. Practically, Ezekiel provides a modern solution to an ancient problem. As long as we remain in the cover of the Most High, no harm will befall us (Ps 91). Where Israel failed was depending on idols, either actual physical statues or depending on ideologies over God, which led to destruction but also more provision than imaginable.

Social Injustice

The second main issue the prophets spoke against was social injustice. Concerning social injustice, the preservation of covenant stipulations from Exodus through Deuteronomy, “presuppose a basic system of morality and justice that was essential to the functioning of Israelite society.”⁸ The LORD provided Israel with not simply laws of “don’t do this, don’t do that” but a guideline for morality. One of the most profound prophets speaking on social issues was Amos. The prophet Amos spoke the words of the Lord regarding responsibility and accountability. God cast judgment against Israel because they were set-apart, holy, and supposed to live at a higher standard than the pagan nations around them (Amos 3:1-2). The main issue of the time was the disparity between the rich and poor and the oppressive nature of the wealthy

⁸ J. G. McConville & Boda, M. J. *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic).

against those less fortunate.⁹ Justice was a main theme as preservation for the covenant. Similarly today, the poor are often categorized as uneducated, unworthy, or undeserving of such charities. As Amos laments, “Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts” (5:15). In a practical sense, the desire for social justice is a fantastic Old Testament principle brought about in a New Testament era. Maintaining justice in the political arena (courts in v.15) is an opportunity to bring Kingdom principles in a fallen world.

Micah was another prophet who spoke against social injustice. In his time, between 735-700 B.C., the wealthy were powerful and conspired against the needy to steal land.¹⁰ Micah cries out, “Woe to those who plan iniquity to those who plot evil on their beds!” (2:1). The Lord then plans disaster against those who defraud the homes of the innocent and takes away the land from the wealthy in charge (2:5). Unfortunately, the increase in refugees in Jerusalem gave the rich opportunity to loan money with hiked interest rates, forcing the refugees into slavery to pay off their debt.¹¹ How true is this today? It is dangerous to discuss offering welfare or monetary blessing to those less fortunate without being called a socialist; however, the Bible never explains that government should be the overarching authority. The Law explains the importance of providing for those in need, loving one’s neighbor, and being a blessing when those are under the curse.

Religiosity

Religious ritualism is the final, though not exhaustive, topic of correction the prophets spoke to. The potential problem that prophets faced was that, if they were to speak falsely against

⁹ Ed Hindson, *The Essence of the Old Testament: A Survey* (Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Publishing Group, 2015).

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 830.

the temple, the penalty was execution.¹² Idolatry fell in with ritualism in the temple. Jeremiah spoke against such heresy. He prophesies, “Do not trust in the deceptive words and say, “This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!” (Jer 7:4). Later he explains that, if they do not change from their ways, the LORD will remove his presence from them (7:7-11). The parallel between then and now is very similar. Often, the church will get stuck in the rut of religious practices, instead of making service about glory and worship to God, first and foremost, and then proper exhortation of the Word through theological interpretation.

Malachi supplements this train of thought. He focuses on the heart of worship, not the simple act of “checking the block.” During his prophetic office, the corrupt priests were allowing defective sacrifices to the LORD, such as blind, lame, and sick animals.¹³ This was in direct violation of the Mosaic Law (Lev 9:2-3; Deut 15:21). Malachi prophesies after the people ask how they have defiled the LORD, saying, “By saying that the LORD’s table is contemptible” (1:7). The value in his protest of such practices is the issue of the heart. Israel was acting as though sacrifice did not matter or that it was another means to earn righteousness. However, God is more interested in the way people worship.

Practicality

Practically, all three of these Old Testament issues, idolatry, social injustice, and religious ritualism, are quintessential life-lessons for the modern era. The coming Messiah would call people to love God with all their heart and soul as the first greatest commandment and to love neighbor as self as the second.¹⁴ By realistically applying these to the Christian life, a more

¹² Ed Hindson, *The Essence of the Old Testament: A Survey* (Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Publishing Group, 2015)., also cf. Deut 18:20

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Matt 22:37

profound love for God exists. It enables humanity to keep his Law and to treat others as they should.

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