

The Cry of the Prophets



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Sam. 8:10–18, Amos 5:10–15, Mic. 6:8, Gen. 19:1–13, Ezek. 16:49, Isa. 1:15–23.*

Memory Text: “He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” (*Micah 6:8, NKJV*).

The Old Testament prophets are among the most interesting characters in the Bible. Their strident voices, their bold messages, their sense of grief, anger, and outrage, and the occasional performances of their messages made them people who couldn't be ignored, even if they might not have always been comfortable to be around.

Sent primarily to Israel and Judah, they were beckoning the chosen people back to faithfulness to God. The people and their leaders were too easily swept up by the idols and lifestyles of the surrounding nations. It was the prophets' thankless task to urge them to repent, sometimes by reminding them of God's love for them and His past action on their behalf and sometimes by warning of the consequences if they continued to walk away from God.

As we will see, too, that among the sins and evils that they warned the leaders and people against, one of the biggest was the oppression of the poor, the needy, the helpless among them. Yes, worshiping idols was bad; yes, following false religious practices was bad; but, yes, taking advantage of the weak and poor was worthy of condemnation, as well.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 3.

The Recurring Call to Justice

Despite God’s clearly detailed plan for the Israelite nation, the Israelite people rarely lived up to their calling. Not many generations after they were established in the land, they asked Samuel, the prophet and judge, to appoint a king to lead their nation, “ ‘such as all the other nations have’ ” (*1 Sam. 8:5, NIV*).

Read 1 Samuel 8:10–18. What was Samuel’s warning to the people in response to their request for a king?

Samuel recognized this as a step toward being like the other nations in other ways, as well. While Samuel sought to counsel the first king, Saul, it was not long before his prophecy began to become reality. Even at the height of the Israelite kingdom, David and Solomon did not escape the temptations, corruption, and excesses of their power.

Throughout the reigns of the kings of Israel and Judah, one of God’s responses was to send prophets to speak His will and to remind the Israelite leaders and people of their God-given responsibilities to the forgotten members of their society.

In the writings of the Hebrew prophets, we see a continuing and recurring call to live justly and to do justice in society. Confronting the unfaithfulness of Israel and its leaders, the prophets were a regular and urgent voice for the voiceless, particularly those who were hurt by Israel’s failure to follow God’s will.

Reflecting on the passion of the Old Testament prophets, Abraham Joshua Heschel contrasts our complacency with their urgent calls for justice: “The things that horrified the prophets are even now daily occurrences all over the world. . . . Their breathless impatience with injustice may strike us as hysteria. We ourselves witness continually acts of injustice, manifestations of hypocrisy, falsehood, outrage, misery, but we rarely grow indignant or overly excited. To the prophets even a minor injustice assumes cosmic proportions.”—*The Prophets* (New York: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1962), pp. 3, 4.

What these prophets offer us is an insight into the heart and mind of God. Speaking on behalf of God, they can help us see the injustice and suffering of our world through God’s tear-filled eyes. But this passion is also a call to action, to work with God to relieve and remedy the oppression and sorrow of those around us.

How do we sometimes seek to be like “all the other nations” in ways that might be harmful to us and others?

Amos

“I was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees. But the LORD took me from tending the flock and said to me, “Go, prophesy to my people Israel” ’ ’ (Amos 7:14, 15, NIV).

Amos was quite open in admitting his lack of qualifications for being a prophet, but as he presents his message to the Israelite nation, he shows an obvious ability to draw his hearers into what he wants to tell them.

He begins on a popular note, listing off the surrounding nations—Syria, Philistia, Phoenicia, Edom, Ammon, and Moab—and detailing their crimes, outrages, and atrocities for which God will punish them (see Amos 1:3–2:3). It is easy to imagine the Israelites applauding these indictments of their enemies, particularly as many of the crimes of these nations had been directed against the Israelites themselves.

Then Amos moves a little closer to home, declaring God’s judgment against the people of Judah, Israel’s southern neighbors in the now-separated kingdoms. Speaking on behalf of God, Amos cites their rejection of God, their disobedience to His commands, and the punishments that would come to them (see Amos 2:4, 5). Again, we can imagine the people in the northern kingdom applauding as Amos points out the wrongdoing of those around them.

But then Amos turns on his audience. The rest of the book focuses on Israel’s evil, idolatry, injustice, and repeated failures in the sight of God.

Read Amos 3:9–11; 4:1, 2; 5:10–15; and 8:4–6. What sins is Amos warning against?

While Amos is not diplomatic in his language and his warnings are those of doom, his message is seasoned with entreaties to turn back to their God. This will include a renewal of their sense of justice and care for the poor among them: “But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” (Amos 5:24, NIV). The last few verses of Amos’ prophecy point to a future restoration for God’s people (see Amos 9:11–15): “In their hour of deepest apostasy and greatest need, God’s message to them was one of forgiveness and hope.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 283.

Are there times we need to be prepared to speak harshly to correct wrong? How do we discern when such language might be appropriate?

Micah

“He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” (*Mic. 6:8, NKJV*). What are ways, right now, that you can live out these words?

Micah 6:8 is perhaps one of the best-known texts in Scripture. Yet, like many of the verses we make into slogans or “posters,” we are probably less familiar with the context of the verse than we might admit.

Read Micah 2:8–11 and 3:8–12. What were the people doing that Micah condemned?

The reign of Ahaz as king in Judah saw God’s people reach a new low in the history and spirituality of their nation. Idolatry and its various evil practices were increasing. At the same time, as other prophets of the time also noted, the poor continued to be exploited and preyed upon.

Micah is no less a prophet of doom than were his contemporaries. Most of his first three chapters express God’s anger and sorrow at the evil His people had done, as well as the destruction that was coming their way.

But God had not given up on His people. Even the strident voices and harsh messages of the prophets were an indication of God’s continued interest in His people. He gave them warnings because of His love and care for them. He longed to forgive and restore them. He would not stay angry forever (*see Mic. 7:18–20*).

Such is the context of the well-known “formula”—act justly, love mercy, walk humbly. It might sound simple, but living such a faith in practical ways is much more challenging, especially when to do so seems so out of step with the surrounding society. Acting justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly requires courage and perseverance when others profit from injustice, scoff at mercy, and ride proudly. Yet, we don’t do this alone; when we act this way, we are walking with our God.

What is the link between doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly before God?

Ezekiel

If we were to ask a group of Christians about the “sins of Sodom,” chances are many would launch into a description of its various sexual sins and other forms of depravity. After all, Genesis 19:1–13 does depict a sick and warped society more than ripe for destruction.

Interestingly enough, though, the answer is more complicated than just that. Consider Ezekiel’s description: “ ‘ “Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy” ’ ” (*Ezek. 16:49, NIV*). Though clearly the Lord was not going to overlook the other forms of depravity found in the city, Ezekiel’s focus here was on economic injustice and a lack of care for those in need.

Could it be that, in the eyes of God, these economic sins were just as bad as the sexual ones?

Coming after the time of Amos, Micah, and Isaiah, Ezekiel’s early prophecies sound a similar note of warning of the coming destruction. However, after Jerusalem falls to the Babylonians and its people are taken captive, Ezekiel’s focus shifts more fully to God’s promises of restoration.

Read Ezekiel 34:2–4, 7–16. Compare God’s assessment of the corrupt leaders of Israel with His own shepherding. How does their treatment of the weakest “sheep” contrast with His methods?

Even as bad as they have been, so as to be *compared to Sodom*, the Lord still was reaching out to them in hopes of turning them away from their wickedness. In God’s renewed plan for His people, they would be back in their land, Jerusalem would be restored, and the temple would be rebuilt. The festivals God gave would again be celebrated, and the land would again be divided equally among the people as their inheritance (*see Ezek. 47:13–48:29*). It seems obvious that God’s intention was that His plan for His people, as first given to Moses and the people of Israel after their rescue from Egypt, would be restarted with the return of His people from captivity. This included concern for the weakest members of society, as well as those who might be considered outsiders.

How important is it to you that our God is a God who offers second chances—and more—even to His people who have done wrong after having had the chance to make better choices?

Isaiah

Read Isaiah 1:15–23; 3:13–15; and 5:7, 8. How would you describe the prophet’s response to what he observes in society around him?

Isaiah’s opening sermon—the first five chapters—is a mix of scathing criticism of the kind of society God’s people had become, warnings of impending judgment in response to their rejection of God and continued wrongdoing, and offers of hope if the people would turn back to God and reform their lives and society. But perhaps the strongest emotion that comes through his words is a sense of grief. Based on his understanding of who God is and what He wants for His people, the prophet is mourning what has been lost, the countless forgotten people who are being hurt, and the judgment that is to come on the nation.

Isaiah continues this pattern through his prophetic ministry. He urges the people to remember what God has done for them. He also offers these people the hope of what God wants to do for them in the future. Thus, they should seek the Lord now, for this renewed relationship with Him will include repenting of their current wrongdoing and changing the way that they treat others.

In chapters 58 and 59, Isaiah specifically returns to the concern for justice. He again describes a society in which “justice is driven back, and righteousness stands at a distance; truth has stumbled in the streets, honesty cannot enter” (*Isa. 59:14, NIV*). But he also affirms that God is aware of it and that God will rescue His people—the “ ‘Redeemer will come’ ” (*Isa. 59:20, NIV*).

Throughout the book of Isaiah, a significant part of the prophet’s attention is given to proclaiming the coming Messiah, one who would ultimately reestablish God’s reign on earth and would bring justice, mercy, healing, and restoration with Him.

Read Isaiah 9:6, 7; 11:1–5; 42:1–7; and 53:4–6. How do these prophecies fit with what you understand of the life, ministry, and death of Jesus? What do these prophecies suggest about the purpose of His coming to this world?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Assyrian Captivity,” pp. 279–292; “The Call of Isaiah,” pp. 303–310, in *Prophets and Kings*.

“Against the marked oppression, the flagrant injustice, the unwonted luxury and extravagance, the shameless feasting and drunkenness, the gross licentiousness and debauchery, of their age, the prophets lifted their voices; but in vain were their protests, in vain their denunciation of sin.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 282.

For Isaiah, “the outlook was particularly discouraging as regards the social conditions of the people. In their desire for gain, men were adding house to house and field to field. . . . Justice was perverted, and no pity was shown the poor. . . . Even the magistrates, whose duty it was to protect the helpless, turned a deaf ear to the cries of the poor and needy, the widows and the fatherless. . . .

“In the face of such conditions it is not surprising that when, during the last year of Uzziah’s reign, Isaiah was called to bear to Judah God’s messages of warning and reproof, he shrank from the responsibility. He well knew that he would encounter obstinate resistance.”—Pages 306, 307.

“These plain utterances of the prophets . . . should be received by us as the voice of God to every soul. We should lose no opportunity of performing deeds of mercy, of tender forethought and Christian courtesy, for the burdened and the oppressed.”—Page 327.

Discussion Questions:

- ① We often understand the function of prophecy as predicting the future. How does the recognition of the Old Testament prophets’ focus on the world in which they lived change your perception of the role of a prophet?
- ② The lives and message of the prophets demonstrate how difficult and dangerous it can be to stand up for truth. Why do you believe they did what they did and spoke in the way they did?
- ③ In the writings of the prophets, God seems to alternate between being angry and showing deep concern for His people. How do you fit together these two aspects of God’s character?

Summary: The Old Testament prophets were passionate and often angry and upset defenders of the way and will of God to their people. Reflecting the expressed concern of God Himself, this passion included a strong focus on justice for the poor and oppressed. The prophets’ calls to return to God included putting an end to injustice, something God also promised to do in His visions for a better future for His people.

Revenge and Forgiveness

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

The long blade of the machete glinted as 21-year-old Wilder swung it over his head.

His eyes flashed with anger. He aimed for his stepfather's neck.

At that moment, his stepfather, Alberto Rui Quaresma, raised his arm, and the blade sliced deeply into his forearm.

Alberto spent the next 24 days in the hospital in São Tomé, capital of the island nation of São Tomé and Príncipe off the West African coast. He underwent surgery, and doctors put a metal plate in his arm. He angrily plotted revenge. He would get a machete and cut Wilder's arm too.

After his biological father pulled some connections, Wilder wasn't arrested. He had attacked his stepfather over a scolding.

Lying in the hospital bed, Alberto noticed that a woman, Maria Rita, came every day to visit her brother, injured in a motorcycle accident, in the same room. He admired her kindness to her brother and announced one day, "I have fallen in love with you."

"No," Maria Rita replied. "I don't want to have a husband. All men should be thrown in the fire."

Her reaction surprised Alberto, who realized that she was carrying hurt from a past relationship. He could understand. At the age of 44, he had had three common-law wives, and the son of his most recent wife had tried to kill him.

Maria Rita didn't want to discuss marriage. She changed the subject to God. "God is love, and God can change your life and make you a new creation," she said. "God will help you to forget what happened and forgive that boy."

After being released from the hospital, Alberto saw Maria Rita occasionally on the street. One day she invited him to attend a 40-day revival meeting at her Seventh-day Adventist church.

Alberto was fascinated by the presentations and was baptized five months later. Later, he proposed to Maria Rita, and she accepted.

Today, Alberto, pictured below, is 50 and works as foreman at a cement warehouse. He also is the treasurer, stewardship director, and Sabbath School teacher at his local church.



He is praying for an opportunity to share with Wilder how God changed his life. The two sometimes meet on the street and exchange greetings.

He laughed when reminded that Wilder tried to kill him the last time they had a serious conversation.

"I'm not worried because God is with me," he said.