

Chapter 15 – God’s Messengers

This chapter presents sketches of four prophets, or spokespersons for God. All of them challenged the idolatry of the northern Kingdom of Israel. They are presented in this order: Elijah, Elisha, Amos, and Hosea.

Elijah

The account of Elijah’s contest with the prophets of Baal (168-169) is filled with humor as well as spectacle. What is fascinating is that this scene and the end of the long drought that had been God’s judgment for Israel’s idolatry are followed immediately by Elijah’s overwhelming fear of Jezebel’s revenge, his flight from her and his depression and complaints to God about being the only faithful person left in Israel.

How could Elijah be afraid of any human being after what God did on Mt. Carmel?

For that matter, how can any of us be afraid of anything after God has raised Jesus from the dead? Do we not believe it, or do we think it didn’t change anything? Or was it just too long ago?

After the roaring fire God sent down on Mt. Carmel, God chose to speak to Elijah on Mt. Horeb/Sinai in “a gentle whisper.”

How can we avoid missing God’s gentle whisper by expecting a more impressive display?

Or how can we dismiss loud displays as being in “poor taste” and therefore certainly not God?

Do you have any ideas about how Christians today might tune our ears to hear God’s voice however God chooses to speak?

Elisha

Elisha was mentored by Elijah and then succeeded him as Israel’s prophet.

Which of Elisha’s miracles do you find the most interesting/inspiring/puzzling?

Amos

Amos was actually a native of Judah, but he travelled to Israel to denounce the idolatry and social injustice that took place during the reign of Jereboam II. Israel was very prosperous during the reign of Jereboam and the people tended to believe that whether or not their practices conformed to God’s instructions, “they must be living right” because things were going so well.

Hosea

Hosea also warned Israel to repent, comparing their faithlessness toward God to sexual promiscuity. God had been faithful to them but they spurned God's love to go their own way.

If Amos and Hosea were speaking to Atlanta and Decatur today, what specific instances of idolatry (false values/standards) and social injustice do you think they would name? Listen carefully to each other. We don't all agree about what social justice looks like in our society.

Chapter 16 – The Beginning of the End (of the Kingdom of Israel)

Assyria was the first great expansionist empire in the ancient world. Egypt had many periods of imperial greatness, but Egyptian religion held that it was a great tragedy to die outside of Egypt and might endanger the soul of the dead person, so the Egyptians never colonized the nations they conquered. Assyria, on the other hand, grew and expanded steadily westward from northern Mesopotamia toward the Mediterranean. Assyria defeated first Syria, longtime rival of Israel, then the northern kingdom of Israel itself. Assyrian policy dictated that conquered people be removed from their own land and replaced by other conquered people who were settled there but had no emotional attachment to the land and therefore no motivation to mount an insurrection. Because the northern tribes were scattered throughout Assyrian territory they came to be called "the ten lost tribes" of Israel. Regardless of what you may hear from time to time, they have not turned up anywhere else.

Hezekiah

The Kingdom of Judah was a vassal of Assyria when Hezekiah came to the throne because his father Ahaz had made a deal with the Assyrians. Hezekiah, however, refused to send tribute to Assyria and began to reform Judean worship, eliminating Assyrian and Canaanite influences.

When the Assyrians laid siege to Jerusalem, Hezekiah prayed for deliverance and God sent the prophet Isaiah to assure the king that God would not let the holy city of Jerusalem be destroyed, "for my sake and for the sake of David my servant." Sure enough, a miracle forced the king of Assyria to return to his capital Nineveh (now part of Iraq).

Isaiah

In the last chapter we encountered prophets of the northern Kingdom of Israel. Isaiah worked in the southern Kingdom of Judah, where he served as an encourager to Hezekiah. The collection of writings that bears Isaiah's name includes not only the prophet's dealings with Hezekiah but writings dating from the Babylonian threat to and conquest of Judah, the promise of a "new exodus" from bondage in exile to a return to the land of promise and visions of God's future glory when all suffering and violence would give way to the universal worship of God and God's eternal rule over a restored Creation.

Thoughts on Christian maturity

Elijah was not able to translate God's miraculous acts on Mt. Carmel into confidence that God would continue to be faithful.

Have you ever gone from a wonderful experience of God to a deep funk in which you found it impossible to believe that God would really come through for you in another situation? What did you do?

How can we as a church undergird people's faith so they do not have to go through deep discouragement alone?¹

The messages of Amos and Hosea were not well-received. Nobody likes to be told that they are on the wrong track and need to repent.

Work on developing the habit of listening especially closely to people who are telling you things you don't want to hear. They may not be speaking for God, but the practice will be useful when and if God does decide to send you a word of correction.

Hezekiah and Isaiah made a good team---a brave and devout leader and a prophet who heard from God. Their partnership made it possible for each of them to hang onto faith.

Do you have a friend to whom you can turn when you are finding it hard to believe, or a prayer partner you can count on?

Have you ever considered expanding that circle of encouragement to someone who is new to faith, or is it just easier to maintain the coziness of a close friendship?

¹ Spiritual discouragement and clinical depression are two entirely different things. Caring Christians can help a person with discouragement. Clinical depression is not so easily dealt with and usually requires professional help.