

Not Alone: God's Relentless Pursuit God Speaks to His People—Prophets

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A Cynic philosopher named Diogenes, quite a funny character, lived in the days of Ancient Greece. Diogenes was from a town called Sinope, in Turkey. He was so odd that his town exiled him. When people from *other* towns asked him if Sinope really condemned him to exile, he would reply, “Yes, and *I* condemned *them* to remain in Sinope.” One time Diogenes was walking the streets of Athens with a lantern in hand. It was reported that he was out looking for an honest man. “But,” he said, “I can’t seem to find one.” Someone said that they once saw him begging for food from a statue. When they asked why, he said, “I’m learning to deal with rejection.” Diogenes was the first (willingly) homeless philosopher. He *willingly* lived in a great water container outside an Athens temple, he *willingly* begged for food in the street, and he *willingly* used the bathroom in public.

Diogenes wasn’t crazy. All this was intentional. Through his words and his actions, he was trying drive home a message: you’re only truly yourself when you’re free from all social and political obligations.

We’re in a series called “Not Alone,” walking through the Old Testament. Today, we’re diving into the prophets to see that God speaks to His people. Similarly to Diogenes (but differently), the prophets often made use of both their words and their lives to drive *God’s* message home!

When we talk about the prophets, we’re talking about Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Some were pre-exilic, some were during the exile, and some were post-exilic. [View the online sermon to see a chart.]

As you can see, we only have seventeen books to cover. How are we going to tackle that? As we’ve been doing throughout this series, we’ll look at the prophets by using our acrostic:

L → Literal—What is the original meaning/message of the book?

I → Incarnational—How is Jesus reflected in the book?

F → Formational—How does the book apply to our lives?

E → Eternal—How does the book point us to heaven and eternity?

LITERAL

What are the prophets about? To answer that, let me give you three aspects to consider.

1. The Prophet’s Job

Have you ever heard someone’s job *title* without having any clue about their job *description*? I remember meeting an actuary once. I was like, “What do you do?” The guy said, “I’m an actuary.” I was like, “Is that actually a job?”

The same thing happens with prophets. We hear the job title but know little of the job description.

When we hear the word “prophet,” we think something like “fortune teller.” While biblical prophecy can have and does have that feature (think of the prophets in the Bible who foretold of the Messiah, Jesus), most of the time what happens in biblical prophecy is *not* fortune-telling, but forth-telling. Prophecy is less, “Here’s a prediction of the future” and more, “Let me proclaim God’s word to you.” In other words,

prophecy is more proclamation than prediction. All our prophets—Isaiah, Amos, Hosea—had this characteristic.

2. The Prophet's Message

Like every song is different, but there are common notes, each prophetic book varies, but there are some common themes!

For one thing, prophets were keen on accusation. They confronted God's people for idolatry, injustice to the poor, and ungodly alliances.

- Idolatry: "Their land is filled with idols; they bow down to the work of their hands" (Isaiah 2:8).
- Injustice: "Your princes are rebels... they do not bring justice to the fatherless" (Isaiah 1:23).
- False alliances: "Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help... but do not look to the Holy One of Israel" (Isaiah 31:1).

The prophets accused Israel. But that's not all. The prophets called people to repentance! Over and over again, as Israel continued their faithlessness, God's spokespeople pleaded with them to return to the Lord! For example, Jeremiah said, "'Return, faithless Israel,' declares the Lord... 'Only acknowledge your guilt—you have rebelled against the Lord your God, you have scattered your favors to foreign gods under every spreading tree, and have not obeyed me'" (Jeremiah 3:12-13).

The prophets brought accusation, the prophets called for repentance, and the prophets also preached a message of judgment. For example:

The great day of the Lord is near—near and coming quickly. The cry on the day of the Lord is bitter; the Mighty Warrior shouts his battle cry. That day will be a day of wrath—a day of distress and anguish, a day of trouble and ruin, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness—a day of trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the corner towers. (Zephaniah 1:14-16)

These are the prophets' main themes: accusation, repentance, judgement.

3. The Prophet's Life

It's noteworthy that many of the prophets would often commit strange, symbolic actions in public to convey God's truth to God's people. Here are a few.

- Jeremiah broke a flask, a hardened clay object, to indicate the surety of God's judgment on His people (Jeremiah 19).
- Ezekiel laid in the dirt, built a model of Jerusalem, and showed it attacked by Babylon (Ezekiel 4).
- Isaiah walked around *naked* for three years as a sign of the humiliation that Israel would soon face as they would soon be stripped and humiliated in exile (Isaiah 20:3-4).

INCARNATIONAL

That was the literal; let's turn to the incarnational, or, how are we pointed to Jesus by these books?

This week, we had some bad storms. As a result, I kept getting text messages from my parents with pictures of impending doom. I got the warning, “There’s a storm coming!” Much like the prophets. But here’s the thing: those texts also pointed me to where it was *safe*.

Here’s the connection to the prophets: Yes, they brought a message of accusation, repentance, and judgment (i.e., a storm), but they too pointed people to where it was *safe*. Where did they point people? To God’s future Messiah, Jesus! Here’s how.

Think “birth.”

- Isaiah prophesied a virgin would conceive and bear a son called Immanuel: “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14).
- He also prophesied that a child called “the Mighty God” would be born: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).
- Micah identified Bethlehem as Jesus’ birthplace: “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times” (Micah 5:2).

Think “life.”

- The prophets foretold of the kind of ministry Jesus would have. Is. 61:1-2 says, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” This is exactly what Jesus did! He even quotes this himself in Luke 4!

Think “death.”

- Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed...He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.... (Isaiah 53:4-5, 7).

Think “resurrection.”

- “Though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied...” (Isaiah 53:10-12).

The prophetic books are replete with information about Jesus! He’s all over the place! We just need eyes to see!

There is a sense that, just as the prophets did with the Israelites, you and I can have accusations leveled against us. You and I are being warned by the prophets to repent. For you and me, there is either judgment or hope. But the reality is also that without Christ *all we are deserving of is accusation and*

judgment. But through Christ, as prophesied by the prophets, there is hope for those who turn to Christ in faith!

FORMATIONAL

What about the formational aspect? How do the prophetic books apply to our lives today?

When I was a kid, mom would go to work and give my brother and me jobs to do when we got home from school before she got back: do the dishes, take out trash, clean bathrooms, do laundry, etc. Was I obedient? Of course I was...not. Many times, she'd rightfully lay out the expectation and I'd *wrongfully* do other stuff. And wouldn't you know, much like the prophets my dad would look at my brother and me and bring an accusation: "Hey, mom said to clean the bathroom. You haven't cleaned the bathroom." Then, he'd bring a call to repentance: "There's still time. You should change your ways and clean the bathroom." Then the promise of judgment: "If you don't clean the bathroom, there will be no shalom in this home!"

There are probably places in our lives where when we open Scripture and allow God's Word to confront us, there's accusation. And when we open Scripture, there's a call to repentance. And when we open Scripture, there's the promise of either judgment or hope, depending on our response!

People don't like to hear it, but the Bible is accusatory. A couple weeks ago, we had a Father's Forum during which we asked the question, "How do we cultivate moral standards in our families?" To answer that, we walked through the Ten Commandments. Know what we found?

- God says, "You shall have no other gods before me." Yet, how often do we give ourselves over to what Tim Keller calls a "counterfeit god?" Here's what a "counterfeit god" is: "...anything more important to you than God. Anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God. Anything you seek to give you what only God can give. Anything that is so central and essential to your life, that should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living."
- God says, "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy." Yet how often do we treat Sunday worship, the Lord's Day, as optional?
- God says, "You shall not covet." Yet how often do we lack contentment as we compare ourselves to who others are or what others have?

So, the Bible accuses us: You have false gods. You do not honor Sundays. You covet. You're sexually immoral. You're selfish. You exaggerate the truth. You're prideful!

But as it accuses us, it calls us to repentance. Do you know what the first words out of Jesus' mouth were when he started his ministry? "The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. *Repent* and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15). In other words, change your life!

After calling us to repentance, you know what we get? A promise of judgment or hope. From the lips of Christ, we get both judgment—"For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind" (John 9:39)—and hope—"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:17).

The question we need to sit with is this: Where is God's Word bringing accusation? Where is it calling us to repentance? Is our life facing judgment or do we have the hope of Christ?

ETERNAL

I want to end on that theme of hope and talk about the eternal. In the prophets we read that when God renews all things, in the end,

- “The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat” (Isaiah 11:6).
- “The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom” (Isaiah 35:1).
- “On that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem...The Lord will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one Lord, and his name the only name” (Zechariah 14:8-9).
- “Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore” (Micah 4:3).
- “But those who die in the Lord will live; their bodies will rise again! Those who sleep in the earth will rise up and sing for joy! For your life-giving light will fall like dew on your people in the place of the dead!” (Is. 26:19 NLT).

I could go on and on, but I'll stop there. This is our hope. This is our glory. This is where we're headed! This is what the prophets point us to. They have a literal message, yes, but beyond the literal, they point us to Jesus, they challenge us in our sin, they call us to repentance, and they point us to our future glory.