**LESSON 14 - RECALLING A DESTINY**

**A. What is a Prophet?**

Today the term prophet is used loosely - prophets of weather, news, champion of a social cause. Most people think of Biblical prophecy as gazing into God's crystal ball, predicting the future. In the 1970s Hal Lindsey wrote The Late Great Planet Earth, giving a timeline and interpretation of symbols in The Book of Revelation, and was considered a prophet of the modern era. Was he? Is this prophecy?

God's purpose in speaking through his prophets is not to communicate information about a timetable of events for the future, although they made predictions with the conviction that God was in control of and shaping events according to His purpose. One purpose was so that people, as they became aware of what was coming, would respond *today*.

**Biblical prophecy is primarily calling people back to God, proclaiming God's word to people.**

1. **Definition of a prophet:** *"One who speaks for another,"* one called by God for the purpose of proclaiming God's message to men. It is not an **invitation** extended by God to the prophet, but rather, an **appointment** – consider his call to Jonah, Jeremiah, Moses. All saw themselves as “*one sent*,” and except for Isaiah, responded reluctantly. Read of Isaiah and Jeremiah’s call: Is. 6 and Jer. 1:4-19.
2. Each could speak for God because of his close relationship with God. They spent time in the Lord's presence. The prophet stood before men as a man who had stood before God (Jer. 23:16-18); they knew His mind and will; they had consecrated lives.
3. Each one spoke in an historical context. History became revelation because there was added to an historical situation a person, prepared beforehand, to say what it meant, to interpret why certain events were taking place, giving them meaning. If they were hearing the prophet, they didn't have to struggle with the meaning of events as, or after, they happened (Is 42:9; 48:3-5).
4. They were bold, often confronting their kings, recognizing that as the leader goes, so go the people; Isaiah was in the royal court, and played an active part in national politics.
5. The message was always couched in terms of "Thus says the Lord." The prophets were not just a mouthpiece mechanically saying what the Lord said to them. Rather, they were colourful people, who were given the words to say, but the message was delivered through their personality, character.
6. Sometimes they emphasized their message with actions.

* Ezek 5:1-4: He shaved his head and beard, 1/3 he burned, 1/3 he scattered, 1/3 put to the sword, symbolic of Israel’s fate.
* Jer 13: I call “The Dirty Underwear Affair,” illustrated the “spoiled” pride of Judah. Linen was the material priest's garments were made of, and his action symbolized the soiling of the formerly intimate relationship between God and Judah by their sin.
* Jer 19: Jeremiah took an earthen vessel and smashed it into pieces, symbolizing that God was going to smash the nation of Israel because the people had forsaken him and were sacrificing to Baal, even practicing child sacrifice, abhorrent to God.

1. **Prophets were rooted in history**, deliberately placed by God at crisis points in history, an evidence of God's grace, giving people opportunity to repent rather than just destroying them because they were disobedient to what he had already said. They began speaking to Israel, calling her back to her destiny as the monarchy, and subsequently the nation, began to crumble.

**B. Disintegration of the United Kingdom**

1. **The underlying cause of the divided kingdom was the disobedience of her leaders to God**

* David/Bathsheba, Solomon/wives (1Kgs 11:1-6). Solomon's harsh fiscal policy was the superficial cause of the split - he was merciless. He had become materialistic in focus, building a wealthy, powerful kingdom at the expense of his people. But the root was his syncretism, actually accommodating the gods of his wives, failing to give spiritual leadership.
* Rehoboam lacked wisdom in dealing with rebellion (1 Kings 12:1-5, 10-11), but the real reason is found in 1 Kings 11:11-13. Division was punishment for failure to follow God (1 Kings 12:24).

There was no national loyalty to David's house, so the nation divided along the lines of 10 Northern tribes, 2 Southern tribes (speaks just of Judah. Benjamin was small and half of the tribe went with the north while half stayed with Judah. Simeon had been incorporated into Judah.)

All of Judah's kings were from the line of David. No dynasty ever developed in Israel.

1. **Society quickly deteriorated**, falling away from God. No sooner had Israel "arrived" - united, politically prominent, with prestige, wealth - than she began to decline.

* Israel was seeking privileges without responsibility, coveted being blessed without being a blessing.
* Idolatry is at the root of all that went wrong in Israel, turning away from God. Jereboam set up conflicting sanctuaries at Dan and Bethel, which became sites first of the golden calves (Egyptian gods), later of Baal worship. Solomon set up places of worship for other gods.
* Israel continued to be outwardly religious, but devoid of righteousness, justice, morality. **Read** **Amos 8:11-12:** Israel experienced a “famine of the word of God.” If she refused to obey he would stop speaking. Interesting note – after Malachi, there were no more prophets until John the Baptist – 400 years of silence!
* Lip service was given to the covenant, but the law had come to mean little. The great shrines of Israel had plenty of worshippers, and were lavishly supported. They absorbed pagan thinking, that God could be appeased by ritual and sacrifice.

**Symptoms:** Lawlessness (permissiveness), the priesthood was full of graft, complacency, no social conscience, false prophets. **Group activity:** Note the list on p. 118 (read related verses)

**Question: Do you see any** parallels in society today? In the church?

Note: "Having the form of godliness but denying its power..." (2 Tim. 3:2-5)

1. **The Temple: gave a false sense of security** (Jer.7:8-15). In spite of her moral decadence, Israel’s mood was optimistic.

* The gracious acts of God were reviewed, the covenant reaffirmed, all were taken as assurance of God's protection of the nation for all time, while the covenant’s stipulations were forgotten.
* The Israelites thought that the bond between God and his people was something that existed in the nature of things, that they would always enjoy God’s unconditional divine favour.
* They felt they were keeping their end of the covenant through elaborate ritual, lavish support of shrines.
* Morality proclaimed in the temple was not practiced in the streets.

Life is a unity of belief and action. Faith is to be expressed in every area of life (James 2:14-24; Heb ?: anything that is not done in faith is sin.)

God’s truth is constant through all generations and needs to be emphasized today, as religion is increasingly seen as separate from other areas of life by many.

Discuss in groups: Can you think of certain areas of life where either Christians believe they should not be involved, or there is push back from the culture that faith should not have influence?

Example: Should our private beliefs affect our decisions in the public square? Controversy around Clinton’s affairs and response in France, Italy – ‘a leader’s private life is a personal thing, and does not affect his ability to lead the country,’ infidelity almost expected. An evangelical Christian asked by the press if his religion would affect his policies, retorted "Of course! Just as much as your philosophy of life and beliefs affect yours!"

Beware of empty “churchianity” or religiosity. Are we ‘religious’ or obedient to Christ? Every thought and action has to be brought under the Lordship of Christ (Rom 12:2).

1. **The Law** actually became a stumbling block to righteousness and justice. Amos was a prophet of righteousness in time of financial affluence and prosperity; danger seemed very far off. Wealth was concentrated in the hands of a few; the poor were exploited, sold into slavery. The poor were “sold for a pair of shoes” (into slavery), “making measures small and the price great” (cheating) (Amos 8:5-6). There was plenty to eat, but a famine of spirit (5:23-24,15)

The Law was given to establish justice, but instead it was twisted and used to persecute the poor (Mk. 7:9-13)

1. **Separation** was turned into a curse. The Jews cultivated a national exclusiveness, became isolationist. The gulf between the Jews and Gentiles only deepened as time passed, running right through into the Christian era. Jesus focused his ministry net to the Gentile region in order to begin to break down this isolation, demonstrating he is a Messiah for all nations, not just the Jews. The issue was finally settled at Antioch with the resolution of the Jerusalem Council, when the wall of division was broken down at last (Acts 15) – Christians did not have to become Jews to be followers of Jesus. Prophets gave the call to missionary endeavour, to be a light to the nations (Isa. 40-55, particularly 42:6).
2. **Circumcision** became a fetish or fixation. While not directly stated it is implied, as we see how central it was to discussions as the new church was being established. (Phil 3:2-6; Gal. 6:15; Jer. 9:25). We cannot become what God wants us to be by external means, i.e. circumcision. What is needed is not reform or reorganization, but regeneration; not circumcision of the flesh, but of the heart (Jer. 4:3-4). Even with reforms such as Josiah's, during which pagan altars were destroyed, hearts still remained the same; when the reformers are gone, the heart reasserts itself.

Examples? What is made illegal goes underground – laws cannot change the heart. Abortion, Native spiritism, temperance movement. This does not mean laws should not be made, but illustrates their limited power to change hearts.

There is a law of faith operative: "What in one generation is a living truth, becomes in a later generation a mere dead formula, that part of the religion learned by rote with which a living faith has to do battle upon new issues.” (W. Robertson Smith)

Jeremiah gets to the essence of religion: it is rooted in the heart of a person. God's dwelling place is not a "house made with hands," but a humble and contrite heart (Jer. 29:4-14).

1. **Holy land is put to unholy use** (Jer. 2:7). Once settled in the Promised Land the Israelites did not use it to bless people, but to persecute them, to use to their own advantage.

**C. Purpose of Prophecy**

Amos 5:14-15: it is a call to turn back to God so judgement might be averted. Hope is given each time a prophet speaks – if the people had repented exile would not have occurred. Modern day prophets also call people back to God, always including a message of hope: “if you repent I will...”

Who are some modern day prophets? Aleksandr Solzhenitzyn, Vishal Mangalwadi,

Gradually prophecy took on Messianic meaning. The Israelites first understood that they were to play a messianic role among the nations, gradually that a Messiah, an individual, was coming who would restore the fortunes of Israel. However most missed the message given through the prophets that when the Messiah comes he will come for the whole world.

As we continue to work through the Old Testament, prophecy will continue to unfold revealing more of God’s plan, leading up to its ultimate fulfillment in Christ.