

Bill Thompson

Preaching Isaiah's Message Today

Abstract

Many pastors avoid preaching from the Old Testament prophets for a variety of reasons, including the difficulty of understanding these books and the challenge of demonstrating their relevance for contemporary audiences. However, the prophetic books represent nearly thirty percent of the scriptures that Paul declared were inspired by God and useful for teaching. Additionally, my research indicates that American Christians in some settings are interested in learning more about the prophet Isaiah and how his message applies to their lives today. This article demonstrates how pastors can interpret and apply Isaiah's message with increased confidence.

Keywords: Preaching, prophets, Isaiah, interpretation, relevance

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Introduction

“Don’t the prophets strike you as kind of cranky?” John Ortberg asks a question that many of us wonder at some point in our studies (2012:47). Philip Yancey adds, “If you examine the Bibles of even the most diligent students you may find a telltale band of white on the paper edges just halfway through ... indicating how seldom fingers touch the Old Testament prophets ...” (1999:171). He continues to suggest that this situation exists because the prophets are “weird and confusing, and they all sound alike.”

The prophetic books represent nearly thirty percent of the Old Testament, yet they are rarely preached from today. Scholars offer a number of reasons why preachers avoid the prophets, including a movement away from preaching the Old Testament in general, an emphasis on preaching the New Testament, and the difficulty of understanding and applying many Old Testament texts (Greidanus 1999:15-23). However, given that the prophets represent a corpus nearly equal in length to the New Testament and are part of the “all scripture” that Paul says are useful for training Christians in righteousness, avoiding them seems misguided at best.

I admit to experiencing many of the same challenges. I struggled to understand the prophets with their murky contexts, strange images, and poetic language. Further, as a preacher, I found myself avoiding the prophetic books because I could not see the relevance of much of their material for today. I realized if I was experiencing this much difficulty understanding the prophets, most of my congregation was probably ignoring them altogether.

Therefore, I chose to write my dissertation on the importance and relevance of preaching Isaiah’s message today (Thompson 2014). The purpose of my project was to measure the cognitive and affective changes in the worship participants of a midsize independent Christian church (“RCC”) in Cincinnati, Ohio during a seven-week expository sermon series on major themes from the book of Isaiah. I employed an explanatory, mixed-methods design that used both quantitative surveys and qualitative focus groups for data collection. As a result of my series, I found that the research participants increased their knowledge of and affective response to Isaiah’s themes. However, my biggest surprise was the participants’ strong interest in learning how to apply Isaiah’s message to their lives today.

The purpose of this article is explore some of the challenges to preaching the prophets, to demonstrate the importance and relevance of preaching Isaiah’s message, and to offer some suggestions pastors can use for preaching prophetic

passages. I believe that pastors who learn how to demonstrate the relevance of the prophetic books will improve their preaching and strengthen their congregations.

1. Challenges to Preaching the Prophets

Homileticians offer a number of reasons why preachers and lay Christians avoid the prophets. First, the last forty years have seen a movement away from preaching from the Old Testament in general. As early as 1972, Gleason Archer, Jr. noted that the average worshipper in Bible-believing churches rarely heard a message from the Old Testament Scriptures (Greidanus 1999:15). This situation has not improved over time. For example, Elizabeth Achtemeier states, “It is fair to say that the Old Testament is largely a lost book in many parts of the U.S. church” (1989:21). Admittedly, these comments are anecdotal statements from noted scholars who may simply be expressing their personal concerns. However, Michael Duduit, editor of *Preaching* magazine, confirms that less than 10 percent of the sermons submitted for publication each year are based on the Old Testament (1992:10). When preachers do choose to preach from the Old Testament, they often resort to biographical preaching of its major characters, mining these stories for so-called truth that is little more than moralism or psychological theory (Clark 2007:23-24).

A second reason why preachers avoid the prophets is the difficulty of understanding many Old Testament texts. Scott M. Gibson notes that many people have difficulty understanding the complicated genres of prophecy and poetry. Additionally, in a discussion during one of his doctor of ministry preaching courses, students offered a number of reasons for not tackling the Old Testament more often: Hebrew is harder to work with than Greek, the culture of the Old Testament is too far removed from Western culture today, and the problem of how the Old Testament should be interpreted in light of the New Testament is difficult to resolve (Gibson 2006:21).

A third reason why preachers tend to avoid the Old Testament, in general, and the prophets, in particular, has to do with how these texts have been treated by scholars. For example, Haddon W. Robinson notes that many graduate students survive courses in Old Testament studies, but their faith is badly damaged by professors who treat the text as a “scissors and paste job put together by some unknown editors” (2006:12). Robinson believes that the characteristic assumption of historical criticism that the biblical books are distorted historical records leads many preachers to question the authority of the Old Testament.

Finally, a fourth reason why many preachers avoid the prophets is because of the difficulty of finding the relevance of the prophetic books for today’s

listeners. Gibson observes that many of his preaching students struggle to find the relevance and application of many Old Testament texts. One student stated, “Given our preoccupation with the pragmatic, ‘how to,’ ‘purpose driven’ approach to preaching, much of the Old Testament doesn’t seem to fit the contemporary ‘niche’ market” (Gibson 2006:24). Bruce Moulton concurs, noting that many preachers avoid preaching the prophets either because they find the prophets to be irrelevant or because they prefer to focus on contemporary life issues. He blames much of the problem on megachurch pastors such as Bill Hybels, Rick Warren, and Andy Stanley, whose preaching styles have “inundated the evangelical community with a seeker-sensitive, non-threatening and Biblically sterile approach to preaching” (2011:3-5). Moulton (2011:33) finds that this trend of avoiding the prophets even extends to noted expositors such as Alistair Begg, Charles Swindoll, and John MacArthur.

For these reasons, I concur with Ellen F. Davis’ assessment of the state of Old Testament preaching in many North American churches. Davis notes, “No one could claim that the current state of Old Testament preaching in the North American church is robust ...” (2006:91). However, by ignoring the Old Testament and the prophets, preachers are robbing their hearers of a fuller understanding of the reasons for their faith. Peter states, “We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place ...” (2 Pet. 1:19, NIV). Therefore, preachers have a responsibility to teach all of God’s Word, not just the parts that are easy to understand, simple to apply, or likely to bring an increase in attendance.

2. Constructing a Sermon from Prophetic Passages

Pastors who are considering preaching from the prophets might begin with Isaiah. I chose to preach from the book of Isaiah for several reasons. First, the book of Isaiah covers all of the major themes of the Bible (Oswalt 2003:17). Second, Isaiah is quoted sixty-six times in the New Testament and, counting allusions, shows up in every major section from Matthew to Revelation (Watts 2001:111-13). Finally, Isaiah’s literary beauty is unmatched among the prophets (Dillard and Longman, III 1994:267). I believed these characteristics of Isaiah’s message would encourage me as I attempted to preach my first sermon series from the prophets as well as create interest among my audience to participate in the series.

2a. Interpreting the Prophet’s Meaning

One of the first steps to interpreting a prophetic passage is to understand the historical and cultural context that the prophet was addressing. Part of this step includes having a good grasp of the prophet’s time period and audience. It

also helps to understand that the prophets' primary task was to call God's people back to covenantal obedience (Fee and Stuart 2003:184). For example, readers who approach Isaiah 1:1-10 with no understanding of these two concepts are likely to question God's apparent harshness in dealing with Judah. However, readers who understand that both Israel and Judah were facing imminent destruction following two centuries' worth of idolatry and injustice are more apt to appreciate God's anger. Additionally, preachers who understand the setting for this passage can help their hearers understand that the God of grace is also a God of holiness. Sometimes the "sores" we encounter as we persist in rebellion are the very things that cause us to appreciate God's offer of forgiveness (Isa. 1:5-6, 18).

In addition to context, preachers must be able to interpret the three main genres of prophetic literature- poetry, prose, and prophetic speech forms (Cook 2012:307). The book of Isaiah consists primarily of prophetic speech forms set in poetry, and includes some of the most beautiful poetry in the prophetic books, although significant sections of prose also occur (e.g., Isa. 6; 36-9) (Cook 2012:308).

Hebrew poetry communicates through terse lines, parallelism, and vivid imagery. The basic unit of Hebrew poetry is a line consisting of two, three, or four "half lines" or cola (Futato 2007:27). Typically, the first colon states the main idea of the line, which subsequent cola then emphasize through restatement. Additionally, modern translations often identify the second, third, or fourth cola by indenting them. Isaiah 1:5a represents a typical line of Hebrew poetry known as a bicolon: "Why should you be beaten anymore? Why do you persist in rebellion?" While this passage consists of two sentences, a line of Hebrew poetry should not be confused with an English sentence as lines can consist of more than one sentence (Futato 2007).

Prose sentences are grouped together in paragraphs, but related lines of Hebrew poetry are formed into strophes and stanzas. A strophe is the equivalent of a paragraph in poetry. Strophes group lines together based on a common theme or sense. Most modern translations indicate the presence of strophes by placing an extra space in between them. Longer sections of poetry consist of several strophes grouped together in stanzas (Futato 2007:29-31). Thus, when reading prophetic literature, preachers should bear in mind that strophes may indicate key ideas or thoughts, while stanzas may set off an oracle or other speech form.

Parallelism is simply a correspondence between the halves, or cola, of a poetic line (Longman 1988:95). Traditional definitions for parallelism include synonymous (repetition between lines using similar ideas), antithetic (repetition between lines using contrasting ideas), and synthetic (repetition between lines using supplemental ideas) (Longman 1988:99-100). Mark D. Futato simplifies these

definitions by noting that parallelism repeats an idea but adds something different in the second colon (Futato 2007: 38).

Terse lines and repeating parallelism set Hebrew poetry apart from prose, yet it is figurative language that makes Hebrew poetry and prophecy both powerful and problematic. D. Brent Sandy (2002:59) states, “If figures of speech were sequoias on the landscape of prophecy, prophecy would be densely forested, and the most common tree in these woods is metaphor.” Sandy notes that *metaphor* can be defined in two ways- a restrictive sense that limits the meaning to two nouns not normally associated together linked by a verb (i.e., “Surely the people are grass,” Isa. 40:7) and a less restrictive sense in which *metaphor* is interchangeable with *figurative language* (Sandy 2002:73-74). In this second sense, metaphors are words used outside their normal context to bring meaning and experience to another context. Given this definition, current scholarship avoids becoming entangled in nuances such as whether a comparison is explicit or implicit (Sandy 2002:74).

Knowledge of metaphor and figurative language will help preachers understand the extreme language of the prophets better. For example, writers and leaders in the ancient Near East often warned violators with the worst imaginable consequences. The prophets frequently used stereotypical language to describe God’s anger toward his people. The difficulty of describing God’s love required poetic imagery as well. Preachers must keep in mind that the primary purpose for metaphor in the prophets was to help the hearers understand God’s perspective on sin and obedience (Sandy 2002:102).

While poetry and figurative language fill the prophetic books, the prophets are best known for their specialized literary genres (Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman 1998:668-69). Scholars differ over the various types of prophetic speech forms or sub-genres. However, the primary forms appear to be judgment oracles, woe oracles, promises of salvation and hope, and apocalyptic literature.

In judgment oracles, the prophet often served as God’s ambassador or messenger. In accordance with common speech patterns of the day, judgment oracles included the name and commission of the prophet, the prophet’s warning, and the phrase, “Thus says the Lord.” This announcement warned the people that they had sinned by violating God’s law and would be punished if they did not repent (Kaiser 2003:105). Isaiah 7:10-25 is an example of a judgment oracle against Judah: “Hear now, you house of David... The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah- he will bring the king of Assyria.” Much of Isaiah 1-12 consists of judgment oracles against Judah, while chapters 13-24 represent a large grouping

of judgment oracles against Babylon, Assyria, Philistia, Moab, Damascus, Ethiopia, Egypt, Edom, Shebna, and Tyre.

Woe oracles begin with an exclamation of sadness, typically employing the Hebrew word *hoy*. Woe oracles describe rebellious actions that offended God, especially violations of covenantal loyalty (Sensing 1999:147). Isaiah is particularly full of woe oracles. Isaiah 5 is a colorful example: “Woe to those who draw sin along with cords of deceit, and wickedness as with cart ropes...” (Isa. 5:18). Other examples from Isaiah include 10:1-11, 20:1-4, 28:1-4, 30:1-3, and 31:1-4 (Kaiser 2003:110).

The presence of so many judgment and woe oracles makes many preachers avoid preaching the prophets. Fortunately, judgment is never the prophet’s final word. The themes of salvation and hope run throughout the prophetic books. Salvation oracles included a reassurance that God’s promises were still true, a reason for believing the promises, and the future promise of a blessing (Kaiser 2003:107-09). Isaiah 40:1-11 (““Comfort, comfort my people,’ says your God...””) may be the most recognizable example of a salvation oracle in Isaiah.

Finally, the apocalyptic genre focuses on visions or prophecies of the end times or of an age to come (Crawford 2000:72). Apocalyptic literature is a distinct form of prophecy. Prophecy focuses on immediate judgment and presents God’s warning in bold terms. Apocalyptic literature uses vivid imagery to paint a graphic picture of distant judgment and restoration (Giese 1995:22). Apocalyptic material is typically associated with a sense of powerlessness and impending doom (Crawford 2000:72-73). The purpose of apocalyptic literature is to encourage God’s people to persevere in dark circumstances (Giese 1995:22).

In summary, the best way to interpret any prophetic text is to understand first the historical context in which the prophet delivered his message. Understanding poetry, figurative language, and the various forms of prophetic speech is also critical to interpreting prophetic texts properly. When these principles are followed, preachers can feel confident that they are sharing the same message with contemporary audiences that the prophets intended for their audiences (Stein 1994:98-99).

2b. Applying the Prophet’s Message

As mentioned previously, a concern for relevancy prevents many preachers from tackling the prophets. However, rather than questioning the perceived irrelevance of prophetic texts, perhaps a better approach is to start with the preacher’s ability to determine the relevance of these passages. For example, Haddon W. Robinson (2001: 158) believes many preachers struggle to find the

relevance in prophetic texts because their seminary training was more concentrated in determining the original meaning of the text than in applying it to today's hearers. As Calvin Miller (2006: 50) notes, the difference between a dry historical lecture and a life-changing sermon from the prophets is application.

Relevancy deals both with determining how a biblical passage applies to individual hearers as well as demonstrating what the passage has to say about God. This section outlines challenges to applying prophetic texts and provides suggestions for making appropriate applications of prophetic texts.

Sidney Greidanus notes that the biggest problem many preachers face with Old Testament texts is crossing the historical-cultural gap that separates the original recipients of the prophets' message from today's congregations. Preachers throughout the centuries have attempted many ways of crossing the historical-cultural gap with varying degrees of success (Greidanus 1988:158-59). For example, *allegorizing* searches beneath the literal meaning of a text for the supposed real meaning of the passage. While generally discredited, preachers occasionally use this approach today when they turn the Cana wedding narrative in John 2:1-11 into a lesson of how Jesus manifests his glory when his servants run out of resources (Greidanus 1988:159-60).

Spiritualizing a text is closely related to allegory. Spiritualizing occurs when preachers overlook the historical facts of a text with a spiritual analogy. For example, a sermon on Genesis 37:24 might spiritualize Joseph's time in the pit by saying that people often feel like they are in a pit as well (Greidanus 1988:160). Daniel Overdorf (2009:74) adds that when preachers spiritualize a text, they unwittingly "snatch the authority from the inspired pen of the biblical writer ... [and] inadvertently put words in God's mouth that He never spoke."

Patternizing is a third improper way of crossing the historical-cultural gap. In this method, preachers emphasize the good or bad traits of biblical characters while simultaneously calling congregants to imitate or avoid the behavior of these characters (Greidanus 1988:161). For example, preachers may emphasize Isaiah's courage to address Ahaz and Hezekiah by encouraging listeners to be willing to confront their superiors. Greidanus notes that among other things, this approach to preaching Old Testament texts ignores both the differences between biblical characters and today's listeners and the biblical author's intent in describing the character's actions (Greidanus 1988:162-63). Overdorf (2009:80) adds that imitating biblical characters and practices can turn descriptions of behavior into normative prescriptions or mandates.

Finally, Overdorf (2009:97) states that some preachers ignore the historical-cultural gap by *promising* outcomes that the Bible does not promise for

today. For example, many Christians claim Jeremiah 29:11 as their favorite verse: “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’” However, this practice ignores that God spoke this word through Jeremiah to the nation of Judah during one of the most difficult times of its history. Since unbiblical promises make for disillusioned believers, wise preachers should ask whether or not a biblical text makes a legitimate promise to believers today (Overdorf 2009:137-38).

Instead of allegorizing, spiritualizing, patternizing, or promising, Greidanus suggests that preachers focus on the biblical author’s message to the original hearers. He notes, “Concentration on the original message is the only way toward valid application. Before one can determine the meaning of a text today, one must know what the writer intended to convey to his original hearers/readers” (Greidanus 1988:166). Once the preacher has established the original meaning, he or she should then focus on two truths that remain constant today- the nature of God and the nature of his covenant people. Despite discontinuities in culture or recipients, God’s nature does not change. Greidanus also notes that despite these discontinuities, God’s demand for obedience from his covenant people does not change, either. Therefore, preachers should approach biblical texts by asking what the text teaches about God and how the original hearers would have responded to that message. Application can then be made between the original hearers of the message and contemporary hearers (Greidanus 1988:169-71, 261-62).

In summary, preachers can learn to apply prophetic texts by first ensuring that they understand the prophet’s message to his original audience. Once the preacher understands the original intent of the author, he or she can look for similar points of contact with today’s hearers by focusing on the God who calls all people to covenantal obedience. If preachers can successfully cross the historical-cultural gap without falling into the ravines of allegory, spiritualization, patternizing, or overpromising, they should be able to find relevance in the biblical text.

3. The Importance and Relevance of Preaching Isaiah’s Message Today

Armed with these insights, I felt much more comfortable as I prepared to preach a sermon series from Isaiah for my dissertation. I conducted my dissertation study during an interim ministry. When I first presented the possibility of this sermon series during my interview with the search committee, all six members of the committee expressed concern about the relevance and the length of the series. However, based on my personal convictions about the importance of Isaiah’s message and the importance of biblical preaching that combines content with life application, I assured the committee that their concerns were unfounded.

My convictions were borne out by the findings of this study. While some focus group members did express concern about the series upon first hearing about it, the majority of them were interested in learning the content of Isaiah's message and how to apply his message to their lives today. Several focus group members complained that previous sermon series from the prophets focused more on explanation than application. Others seemed baffled by how to interpret the prophets in general. However, by the midpoint of the sermon series, all focus group members were amazed by both the content and the applicability of Isaiah's message. Several members were visibly moved by Isaiah's message of sin and God's grace. Two women admitted struggling with their own guilt, another woman was thankful to learn that the ancient Israelites faced the same temptations that she faces, and several men and women expressed a strong desire to see Isaiah's message on sin and repentance taught more broadly in American churches. Additionally, the majority of members resonated with Isaiah's themes of trusting in God because of his sovereignty and his concern for his children. One man expressed thankfulness for the reminder that God will take care of his financial worries, while four other members witnessed God's sovereign care in other ways through temporary unemployment, health concerns, and providing for a sick woman in the congregation. One man was amazed by Hezekiah's faith in placing his letter from the Assyrian commander before the altar of God, only to find himself in a similar situation when his wife lost her job. After the sermon on how God's grace should lead believers to serve him more willingly, the head of the vacation Bible school program was overwhelmed by people volunteering to serve. She said, "I don't think it was a coincidence that the message on that Sunday was about how God's grace should cause us to want to serve him." One woman seemed to sum up the overall thoughts of the group when she stated, "I just see so many applications from the prophets that apply to us today."

While preachers express various concerns for avoiding prophetic texts, a perceived lack of relevancy should not be among them. This research project affirms that when presented with sermons that balance the original meaning of the text with contemporary applications for today, many Christians are hungry to hear from the prophets.

4. Recommendations

The strongest implication of this study is the need for pastors to preach more often from the Old Testament in general and from the prophets in particular. Anecdotal evidence from several scholars and homileticians indicate that a general familiarity with Old Testament teachings has decreased over the past fifty years.

This observation was supported by my own discovery that the participants of RCC could only remember two sermon series from the prophets in over five years. However, given the participants' interest in sermons that show the relevance of Old Testament texts, and given that the prophets represent as large a percentage of the Bible as does the entire New Testament, pastors should be encouraged to preach from the prophets. Not only would such preaching be welcomed by their congregations, preaching from the prophets would increase the amount of available material for preaching.

A second implication of this study is that audience interest in sermons from the prophets is closely tied to their perception of the relevance of the sermon. Preaching from Old Testament texts can be just as relevant and as exciting as preaching from New Testament texts if the pastor learns how to connect the needs and the circumstances of modern hearers to the needs and circumstances of the original hearers. For example, many homiletics recommend studying the historical context of the passage to determine parallels between the original audiences' situation and that of modern audiences. These suggestions were borne out by numerous comments from focus group members concerning the relevance of this sermon series for their personal lives.

Pastors who would like to improve their ability to preach from the prophets should consider two suggestions. First, the best way to interpret any prophetic text is to understand first the historical context in which the prophet delivered his message. Understanding poetry, figurative language, and the various forms of prophetic speech are also critical to interpreting prophetic texts properly. When these two principles are followed, preachers can feel confident that they are sharing the same message with contemporary audiences that the prophets intended for their audiences (Stein 1994:98-99). Second, preachers can learn to apply prophetic texts by first ensuring that they understand the prophets' original message to their original audience. Once the preacher understands the original intent of the author, he or she can look for similar points of contact with today's hearers by focusing on the God who calls all people to covenantal obedience. Focusing on the commonalities and differences between today's congregants and the original audience helps determine how precisely the sermon application can mirror the original purpose of the text. If preachers can master these principles, they should be able to find relevance in the biblical text.

5. Conclusion

While the prophets are variously considered as predictors of the future, social critics, or even cranks, they were ultimately God's messengers to his people,

spokesmen who called God's people to obedience. Therefore, while preachers may express various concerns for avoiding prophetic texts, a perceived lack of relevance should not be among them.

Pastors who are considering preaching from the prophets have a rich set of texts from which to choose. However, John N. Oswalt (1986:3) suggests beginning with Isaiah. He notes, "Of all the books in the OT, Isaiah is perhaps the richest. Its literary grandeur is unequaled. Its scope is unparalleled. The breadth of its view of God is unmatched . . ." Additionally, Isaiah is the most quoted prophet in the New Testament, with citations or allusions appearing in every New Testament book (Watts 2005:111-113).

Preachers who learn how to interpret and apply the prophets' messages in a relevant manner can be assured that their sermons will resonate with their hearers. The prophets speak of themes such as sin, holiness, salvation, hope, and trust, themes that are as important to hearers today as they were to the prophets' original audiences. Pastors who learn how to preach these themes from the Old Testament prophets will find their preaching strengthened and their range of biblical passages greatly expanded.

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