He Gave Us Prophets

LESSON THREE

THE PEOPLE OF THE COVENANT

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He Gave Us Prophets

Lesson Three

The People of the Covenant

INTRODUCTION

I'm sure you've heard the old joke about the pastor who said, "This job would be great if it weren't for the people." Well, that's the way it is in many areas of life. Life would be great if it weren't for the people we had to deal with, but the fact is that we just can't get away from people. Life is made up with others all around us. And that's the way it was with Old Testament prophets. They dealt with people as well.

For this reason, we've entitled this lesson "The People of the Covenant." We'll examine three concepts: first, humanity and covenant — how did the Old Testament prophets see a covenant relationship between God and all people?; second, Israel and covenant — what special role came to the people of Israel through covenant relationship?; and then, finally, salvation and covenant community. Let's look first at the way the prophets of the Old Testament understood all of humanity in covenant with God.

HUMANITY IN COVENANT

If there's one thing that we know about people it is that they are different from each other. We come from different cultures and we have different personalities. But at the same time, we know that there are certain things that are common among all people. We all get hungry. We all need a friend. We all pay taxes. Well, the prophets knew that this was true about people as well. They understood that different nations of the earth were treated differently by the Lord because God had chosen Israel as his special people. But at the same time the prophets knew that God had also entered into covenant with all the nations of the earth.

In this part of our lesson we're going explore these universal covenants and how the prophets represented these covenants to the nations of the earth. Although different Christian groups handle covenants differently, it is safe to say that many Christian traditions have seen five major covenant events in the Old Testament. These events significantly shaped the history of the Bible. At five different times God established covenants between himself and his people through representative heads. These representatives were Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David.

CENTRAL CONCERNS

The first two covenants of the Old Testament, the covenants with Adam and Noah, stand apart from the others because they were universal covenants. These were covenants established between God and all of humanity. They were not for a particular

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people but for all people. They established permanent arrangements between God and every human being that will ever live. These universal covenants provided Old Testament prophets with important theological orientations as they served as God's covenant emissaries. As we explore these universal covenants, we'll look at two different issues: First, what were the central concerns of these universal covenants? And second, how did the prophets' ministries depend on these covenants? Let's look first at the central concerns of the covenants with Adam and Noah.

Adam

The first covenant in the Bible is the covenant that God established with Adam. Now this covenant is traditionally known as the "covenant of works." In our day a number of theologians think that we shouldn't call this a covenant, and to be sure, the term "covenant" is not used in Genesis 1–3. And also, there was much more than works involved in this covenant made with Adam. Perhaps it is better simply to speak of this as an "arrangement" that God had made between himself and Adam. But in the days of Adam, God established certain pillars that remain in effect throughout all the history of the Bible.

At least three pillars were established in the days of Adam which endure for the entire history of the Bible. These pillars were human responsibility, human corruption, and human redemption. First, God ordained human responsibility in the days of Adam. God created the human race as his image in this world, and when God first spoke about human beings in Genesis 1:26, he said these words:

> **Let us make man in our image ... and let them rule (Genesis 1:26).**

All human beings are God's image and therefore responsible to represent his kingship in this world. Human beings are to live in ways that honor God throughout every part of the earth. And along with every other portion of Scripture, the prophets understood that all people of every nation received this sacred responsibility in the days of Adam.

Beyond this, the arrangement with Adam also established that all human beings have suffered corruption. As the entire history of the Bible illustrates so clearly, the events of Genesis 3 were not isolated to the lives of Adam and Eve. As the book of Romans in chapter 5 teaches, because of Adam's sin, the entire human race has become sinful and stands under the judgment of God. The prophets did not have to look far to see that the nations of the world had turned away from their Creator, and they had turned away from their responsibilities as his image.

Beyond this, the arrangement with Adam also established a hope of redemption for humanity. In Genesis 3:15, God cursed the evil serpent who tempted Adam and Eve. There he promised that one day the offspring of Eve will crush the serpent's head. The prophets of the Old Testament understood that eventually victory over evil and death would come to every nation on the earth. These basic pillars of human responsibility, corruption, and redemption established the structures of divine, human interaction throughout all of history. They extend to the entire human race.

Noah

Let's turn now to the major concerns of the second universal covenant made between God and Noah. Put simply, God furthered the structures of Adam's arrangement, but added the feature of stability for the physical universe. After the flood, God placed his bow in the clouds to demonstrate that he would not punish human beings immediately every time they sinned. Instead, God promised a new order, an order in which he would be patient with our sins. As God declared in Genesis 8:22:

> **As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease (Genesis 8:22).**

Why did God make this promise of natural stability? What was his central concern? Well, there are at least two main reasons for the stability of the universe given in the days of Noah. In the first place, God was demonstrating his patience with the human race. This purpose becomes clear in the New American Standard Bible in its translation of Genesis 8:21:

> **And the Lord said to himself, "I will never again curse the ground on account of man, for the intent of a man's heart is evil from his youth; and I will never again destroy every living thing, as I have done" (Genesis 8:21, NASB).**

This verse tells us that God recognized the total depravity of human beings and determined to be patient toward us by not destroying the world every time we sinned.

A second purpose for the stability of nature in Noah's covenant is also evident. God has given us an orderly world so that we can fulfill our human destiny to serve as his image. Genesis 9:1, 3 tells us that after the flood God spoke to Noah, the father of all people, and he said these words:

> **Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth… I now give you everything (Genesis 9:1, 3).**

Drawing upon the words he first spoke to Adam in Genesis 1, God once again affirmed the responsibility of all nations to serve as his image. So we see that God promised to be patient and to provide a stable world for the human race so that all nations of the earth could serve as his image.

The main concerns of the first covenants in the Bible are very similar. With Adam, God has established the pillars of responsibility, corruption, and redemption. With Noah, he continued these principles along with divine patience and reaffirmation of our human destiny as images of God.

PROPHETS' DEPENDENCE

Now we have to ask a second question: how did the ministries of Old Testament prophets depend on these universal covenants? Now, we have to admit that the prophets of the Old Testament do not explicitly mention Adam and Noah very often. For the most part, the theological perspectives derived from the covenants with Adam and Noah lie implicitly behind what Old Testament prophets said. Perhaps the most important way in which prophets depended on these covenants is in their attention to Gentile nations.

As God's covenant emissaries, Old Testament prophets focused most of their attention on the nation of Israel, but they were also emissaries to the nations of the world. As God told Jeremiah when he first called him to minister in Jeremiah 1:5:

> **I appointed you as a prophet to the nations (Jeremiah 1:5).**

Prophets frequently addressed foreign nations because they were emissaries of the universal covenants with Adam and Noah.

Sins of the Nations

The prophetic concern for the nations went in two directions. First, the prophets usually pointed out the sins of the nations and threatened God's judgment against them. For instance, the entire book of Obadiah is devoted to exposing the sins of Edom and announcing divine judgment. Jonah reports that the prophet ministered to the city of Nineveh. Nahum declared God's judgment against Assyria. Large portions of other books focus on the wrath of Yahweh coming against the nations other than Israel. Many passages make it clear that the prophets believed all people were sinful and subject to the judgment of God.

Redemption for the Nations

Although the theme of judgment was prominent in the prophets' addresses to the nations, we must also remember a second theme, the theme of redemption for the nations. The prophets often spoke of a future time of great blessings for the nations of the earth. From their point of view, the future held a hope of redemption for every tribe and language. God's plan was not that only one nation would be saved from the dominion of sin and death. Instead, in fulfillment of his original design for the human race, God always intended to redeem people from every nation.

For this reason, the prophets not only looked forward to a day of great blessing when Israel would be redeemed from exile; instead, many people from the Gentile nations would also participate in this great redemption from exile. For example, in Isaiah 25:6-8, the prophet announced that one day in the future:

> **The Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples ...**
> **On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples,**
> **the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever**
> **(Isaiah 25:6-8).**

In Jeremiah 3:17 a similar theme appears:

> **All nations will gather in Jerusalem to honor the name of the Lord.**
> **No longer will they follow the stubbornness of their evil hearts**
> **(Jeremiah 3:17).**

Many prophets announced that the day would come when even Gentiles would repent of their rebellion against God. They will come to Israel and find salvation from divine judgment. Now, of course, as Christians we know that this promise is fulfilled in the spread of the gospel of Christ throughout all the world. When Christ commissioned his apostles to go to all nations, he was fulfilling the positive hopes that the Old Testament prophets had for the nations of the earth.

So we see that in the days of Adam and Noah, God entered into universal covenants which extend to all people. As emissaries of God, the King of all the world, Old Testament prophets drew attention to the severe violations of the nations against God. But they also announced that one day God will redeem a people from every tribe and nation of the earth.

We have already seen that God made covenants with all people in Adam and in Noah. But now we're going to turn our attention to Israel as the special covenant people of God. What covenants did God make with the nation of Israel?

ISRAEL IN COVENANT

Often my family gives parties for seminary students, but sometimes the list is so long that we don't call every single one of them ourselves. Instead, we select a few key students and they call the others. Well in many respects, this is what God did with Israel. They were his key people, and he called Israel to himself with special covenants so that Israel then could minister or call all peoples to God.

You will recall that God made three major covenants with Israel. He made covenants though Abraham, Moses, and David. Each of these covenants prepared Israel in special ways, not only for her own salvation, but for the salvation of all the families of the earth. Let's look first at the covenant with Abraham.

ABRAHAM

God's covenant with Abraham was special because it was the first to identify Israel as the one family chosen to bear God's gracious redemption to the entire world. How were they going to do this? By living in a redemptive covenant with Yahweh. We should look first at the central concerns of this covenant with Abraham, and then we'll be

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able to explore the ways in which Old Testament prophets depended on the covenant with Abraham.

Central Concerns

We may summarize the Abrahamic covenant as one in which God chose a special nation. The establishment of Israel as God's chosen people involved two major blessings from God to this nation. God promised Abraham many descendants and a special land. In Genesis 15 and 17, God's covenant with Abraham showed the way for Israel to multiply many descendants and to take possession of a bit of land. Now, this multiplication and possession of a special land was to be a starting point for extending God's kingdom throughout the world. From this point on the descendants and the land of Abraham took center stage in the history of the Bible.

Prophets' Dependence

We have seen that Abraham was promised many descendants and a special land. And now we must ask, how did Old Testament prophets depend on this covenant with Abraham? What did they believe about this covenant? Time and again the prophets of the Old Testament draw upon the principles of the covenant between God and Abraham. The abiding importance of this covenant is assumed throughout all the prophets. They spoke frequently about the promise of land and the promise of a multitude of descendants.

For example, in Isaiah 41:8 the prophet Isaiah refers to the nation of Israel in this way:

> **[O] seed of Abraham my friend (Isaiah 41:8, ASV).**

In Isaiah's thinking the nation of Israel, even in his own day, was the rightful heir of Abraham's covenant. In a similar way, Hosea alludes to the covenant with Abraham. In 1:10 he says that after the exile,

> **The number of the sons of Israel will be like the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered (Hosea 1:10, NASB).**

Allusions like these demonstrate that the prophets depended heavily on the covenant with Abraham. Whenever they spoke about God giving land to his people or multiplying their numbers, they recalled the covenant God made with Abraham. Abraham was mentioned by name only seven times in the prophets of the Old Testament, but the theology of Abraham's covenant permeated their ministries.

MOSES

Abraham's covenant was the first one with the nation of Israel, but it was followed by a second covenant, the covenant with Moses. In our day, the Mosaic

covenant is not always seen in a positive light, but nothing could be further from the truth. Moses' covenant plays a vital role in the positive redemption of the human race. Once again, we should take a look at the central concerns of Moses' covenant and then consider how Old Testament prophets depended on this covenant.

Central Concerns

The arrangement with Moses focuses on the law of God. The law of God provided the regulations governing covenant life in Israel. This covenant appears most explicitly in Exodus 19–24 where the covenant was initiated with the book of the covenant and the Ten Commandments. It also appears in the worship regulations of the book of Leviticus. The book of Deuteronomy records Israel's covenant renewal near the time of Moses' death. Put simply, the Mosaic covenant focused on the regulations of covenant life, the laws which would lead to blessing and curse from the great divine Suzerain.

Prophets' Dependence

Well, how did Old Testament prophets depend on Moses' covenant? Old Testament prophets were deeply indebted to Moses and his law because his law provided the main standards by which prophets critiqued the nation of Israel. Prophets prosecuted the covenant by reminding Israel of her responsibility to be faithful to the law of Moses. As we'll see in the next lesson, even the specific blessings and curses which the prophets announced to the people of God, even these came largely from the covenant with Moses. The laws of Moses became the primary tools of a prophet's trade.

For example, when Isaiah wanted to indicate that the people of God had been unfaithful to the Lord, he appealed to the Mosaic Law as an authoritative standard. As he said in Isaiah 5:24:

> **They have rejected the law of the Lord Almighty (Isaiah 5:24).**

This kind of reference to Moses and his law appears innumerable times in the prophets because Old Testament prophets were emissaries of God, calling Israel to account for the ways she had violated the covenant with Moses.

DAVID

The final Old Testament covenant given to Israel as a nation was the covenant with David. Abraham's covenant focused on descendants and land. Moses' gave attention to laws for living in the land. Following Moses, God made a special covenant with David, the king of Israel. Once again, we should look at the main concerns of this covenant and then how the prophets depended on it.

Central Concerns

What were the main concerns of the covenant with David? David's covenant focused on building God's people into an enormous empire. The Davidic covenant appears in 2 Samuel 7, Psalm 89, and Psalm 132. These passages make it clear that one vital aspect of this covenant was the establishment of David's family as the permanent dynasty over God's people. David's family certainly had troubles and failures, but God chose this family to be the dynasty over his people forever. David's descendants would one day establish a worldwide kingdom of salvation. Needless to say, this covenant offered the people of God a very bright future of victory and dominion over the earth. And even as Christians today, we follow Jesus as our King because he was the last great son of David, the perfect son of David, whose kingdom will never end.

Prophets' Dependence

Now we must ask another question: how did the prophets depend on this covenant with David? Old Testament prophets frequently drew upon David's covenant as they ministered to Israel. As far as the prophets were concerned, God promised that eventually the kingdom of David would be a magnificent, worldwide kingdom. They believed this very strongly and predicted that it would happen one day in the future. For example, in Amos 9:11, the prophet describes the days of the restoration after the exile in this way:

> **In that day I will restore David's fallen tent. I will repair its broken places, restore its ruins, and build it as it used to be (Amos 9:11).**

Old Testament prophets speak this way about the Davidic covenant many times. His covenant was so important to them that they mention David by name thirty-four times.

The New Covenant

Of course, we would be remiss if we do not mention that Old Testament prophets were also aware of a covenant that was still in their future. I have in mind here the new covenant, which God made through Christ. What were the main concerns of this new covenant? The new covenant may be characterized by one word: fulfillment. All the promises given to God's people in the earlier covenants with Abraham, Moses, and David, were to be realized in the period of the new covenant. The people of God would be numerous and inherit the entire earth as their land. The law of Moses will be written in the heart and obeyed from the heart. The Son of David, the great Son of David, will reign on the throne forever.

How were the prophets influenced by this new covenant? Well, the Old Testament prophets longed for the day of this grand covenant. For example, Jeremiah spoke of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31:

> **"The time is coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah" (Jeremiah 31:31).**

Jeremiah predicted that in the days after Israel's exile, God would renew his covenant in dramatic ways. The prophet Ezekiel spoke of this future covenant as well. In 34:25 and 26 we read these words in Ezekiel:

> **I will make a covenant of peace with them and ... I will bless them (Ezekiel 34:25, 26).**

Old Testament prophets ministered as God's emissaries in anticipation of the great end-time covenant to come. And as we learn about Old Testament prophets, we'll see them anticipating this New Testament covenant time and again.

The covenants that God established with Israel guided the Old Testament prophets in all that they did. They understood that God had a special role for the nation of Israel and that the covenants with Abraham, Moses, and David, and even the new covenant, guided Israel in that special role. And so when prophets ministered to God's people, they ministered within the confines of these special covenants God had made with his people.

So far in this lesson on the people of the covenant we've seen that Old Testament prophets served as emissaries of God's covenants with humanity in general, and with Israel. All the people of the earth were subject to the universal covenants with Adam and Noah. But the Israelites and Gentiles who converted to their faith were in very special covenants with God. They were separated from the rest of humanity. At this point, we need to look at one other aspect of the people of the covenant. How did the prophets understand salvation in the covenant community?

SALVATION IN COVENANT

Often modern Christians have a hard time understanding salvation in covenant because we make distinctions that the prophets did not follow. Under the influence of revivalism, many times we divide the human race into two tidy groups — those who are saved and those who are not saved, or the regenerate and the unregenerate. Now, don't get me wrong, that distinction is very important because people are either saved or not saved, or, regenerate or not regenerate. But at the same time, these are not the categories that Old Testament prophets thought in terms of.

One of the best ways to understand how prophets understood salvation is to make distinctions between three different kinds of people in the world: first, those outside of the covenant community of Israel; second, those who were in the visible covenant community of Israel; and third, those who were within the invisible covenant community.

Outside Covenant

Consider the first category of those who were outside of the covenant. In reality, this is the most obvious category of people that the prophets followed. These are people outside of the covenants God made with Israel. When God chose the nation of Israel and gave her special covenants in Moses, Abraham, and David, this choice of Israel meant that other nations of the earth were not among the chosen people. With rare exceptions of people like Ruth and Rahab, Gentiles were separated from God's people and therefore outside of these special covenants with the nation. As we have seen, the prophets believed that Gentiles were bound to the universal covenants of Adam and Noah. The basic structures of judgment and redemption in those covenants applied to all nations. But at the same time, during the days of the Old Testament, those outside of the covenant community, or outside of Israel's special covenant relationship with God, these people were cut off from the possibility of salvation. Their sin had left them without hope in the world.

Paul spoke this way about Gentiles in the book of Ephesians. In Ephesians 2:11-12 he says these words:

> **Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth ... remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world (Ephesians 2:11-12).**

This was the condition of Gentile nations during the Old Testament days. They were outside of the covenant and, with rare exception, very distant from the possibility of salvation which came through the covenants with Israel.

Visible Covenant

Most Christians have little trouble understanding the category of Gentiles as outside of the covenant, but I have found that difficulties begin to arise when we move to the second category of people in the prophetic outlook — people within the visible community of Israel. When we speak of the visible covenant community, we have in mind all of those in the Old Testament days who were a part of the nation of Israel. This category included both true believers and those who were not true believers. Perhaps one of the best ways to introduce this covenant category is to reach back into older Protestant theology.

Although older Protestants used different terms than the prophets did, Protestant theologians from the past have described the church in ways that parallel the prophets' way of thinking about the covenant community of Israel. I have in mind here the traditional designation of the "visible church." Unfortunately, this terminology is not used much today so we need to take a look at what older Protestants meant by this term,

the "visible church." The *Westminster Confession of Faith* describes the "visible church" in this way in chapter 25, paragraph 1:

> **The visible church consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion and of their children; and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.**

This description of the visible church alerts us to two features of the visible covenant community. First, the visible church includes more than true believers. Many people who come to church simply claim to follow Christ, but these unbelievers have been separated from the world by their association with the Christian faith. They have placed themselves in the membership of the church, but they are still not eternally redeemed from their sins.

Beyond this, it is important to notice the special titles given to the visible church. It sounds strange to our ears, but according to traditional Protestant theology, the visible church, mixed with believers and unbelievers, may rightly be called the "Church," the "Kingdom," the "House of God," and the "Family of God." In contemporary Christian vocabulary, we normally reserve these terms for people we believe are truly regenerate and those who are irrevocably heaven-bound. But according to traditional theology, these terms are general titles embracing everyone who is within the visible church whether they are eternally redeemed or not. When we read Old Testament prophets, it's not difficult to see that they thought in similar ways about the visible nation of Israel.

This category of the visible covenant community helps us understand many passages in the prophets. For instance, the first chapters of Hosea present a striking contrast of terms used to describe the visible covenant community. In 1:3-9, Hosea announces great curses to come upon northern Israel. He does this by giving his three children names that predict tremendous curses. He named one child Jezreel, recalling the destruction that took place in Israel in the days of Jehu. This child symbolized that God was threatening to destroy Israel. Hosea named his second child Lo-Ruhamah. Her name meant "not loved by God." And in this context, love was a term describing a positive covenant relationship of blessing between God and his people. This child symbolized that God's covenant blessings would soon be withdrawn from the nation. Hosea's third child was called Lo-Ammi, "not my people." This child symbolized the threat that God would disown his people by withdrawing his covenant blessings from the nation of Israel.

At the same time, however, Hosea also gave hope to those who were about to fall under God's judgment of exile. The prophet assured the nation of Israel that restoration to the land would take place one day. To convey this hope, Hosea recalled the terrible names that he gave his children once again. In 1:10, he says that Jezreel will take place again, but this time he does not mean that God will fight against his people. Instead, God will fight against the enemies of Israel. Beyond this, when God returns the Israelites to their land after exile, he will rename them Ruhamah, "loved by God," according to 2:1. In that day, those who were called "not my people" will become Ammi, "my people."

It's important to see that Hosea speaks of the visible covenant community in contrasting terms. The rest of Scripture makes it plain that Hosea was not talking about these people as having salvation, then losing it and getting salvation again. Instead, this is covenant language. With these special titles, Hosea is announcing that God will withdraw

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his covenant blessings but then one day renew his covenant, and Israel will receive God's blessings again.

There are many terms that we normally reserve in our vocabulary for true believers which the prophets applied to the visible covenant community of Israel. When we use terms like, "elect" or "chosen," we usually mean elect for salvation. But the prophets did not mean this very often. Instead, they used the term "elect" or "chosen" to describe the people who are in the visible covenant community whether they were true believers or not. For this reason, in Isaiah 14:1 we read these words:

> **The Lord will have compassion on Jacob; once again he will choose [or elect] Israel (Isaiah 14:1).**

Notice that Isaiah said Israel would be chosen once again. As strange as it sounds to our ears, in the vocabulary of the prophets people can be chosen by God, rejected, and then chosen again. This is because God's election in the prophetic vocabulary is not election to salvation but election to covenant blessing. The elect are those who were in the visible covenant community, and that community includes both believers and unbelievers. Even in the New Testament, sometimes the term elect is used in this way. When Jesus says in John 6:70:

> **Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil! (John 6:70).**

Jesus speaks of calling Judas and the other Apostles to a special covenant relationship of blessing. He does not speak of eternal salvation.

INVISIBLE COMMUNITY

Now we come to the third category of people with whom the prophets dealt: the invisible covenant community. Once again, traditional Protestant theology gives us some help in this area. Within the visible church, there is a select group known as the "invisible church." In the language of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 25, paragraph 1, the invisible church:

> **Consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ, the Head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all.**

In this confessional statement, the invisible church is described from God's perspective. It's defined from an eternal perspective as the full number of human beings who will come to saving faith and will spend eternity in the blessing of God.

From this description of the invisible church, we can see at least two basic ideas. First, the invisible church is made up of true believers only. These true believers are within the visible church, but they have exercised saving faith, and as a result they enter into the smaller community of the invisible church. Second, we can see that the invisible

church has a secure destiny of salvation. Because these people have given their hearts to the service of Christ, their salvation will be kept sure until the end.

The apostle Paul pointed to this kind of distinction between the visible and invisible covenant community even within the nation of Israel. In chapter 9 of Romans, verses 6 and 7, he says these words:

> **For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Or because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children (Romans 9:6-7).**

Paul's idea is this — to be a physical child of Abraham may bring you into the nation of Israel, but it was not enough to bring salvation. A true child of Abraham must have saving faith, like Abraham. For this reason, we may speak of an Israel within Israel — an invisible, redeemed people of God within the visible community of the people of God.

This idea of the invisible church parallels the thinking of Old Testament prophets. They looked at the nation of Israel and believed that there was an invisible covenant community. Some people within the nation of Israel were always faithful; they were the faithful remnant because they had exercised saving faith. Their eternal destinies were secure even when the nation as a whole went through times of terrible judgment from God. This distinction of a redeemed people within the visible covenant community becomes clear in a number of passages in the prophets.

Time and again, the prophets distinguished between Israelites who were merely externally in the visible covenant community from those who genuinely repented and were among the invisible, true believers whose destinies were eternally fixed. For example, in Jeremiah 4:4 we read these words addressed to the visible nation of Judah:

> **Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, and remove the foreskins of your heart, men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem; lest my wrath go forth like fire (Jeremiah 4:4, RSV).**

When Jeremiah ministered to the nation of Judah, all the men of Israel had been physically circumcised. For this reason, they and their families were in the visible covenant community. At the same time, however, Jeremiah knew that the hearts of most of the people of Judah were not right with God. So, he exhorted them to be saved from God's wrath by circumcising their hearts through true faith.

The prophet Ezekiel also illustrates this distinction very clearly. In Ezekiel 18:31, he said this:

> **Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel? (Ezekiel 18:31).**

Ezekiel spoke to people who were physical children of Israel, but this did not mean that they were redeemed people, bound for eternal life. For this reason, the prophet calls for deep sincere repentance of heart.

Whenever we read Old Testament prophets, we must always remember how they understood salvation in relationship to the covenant. To be in covenant was not the same

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as being redeemed or eternally saved. When Old Testament prophets categorized people they thought first of the Gentiles, who were outside the visible nation of Israel. These people were lost and without hope, unless they came to Israel and found salvation in her God.

Now the prophets knew that the visible nation of Israel was very special in God's eyes. It consisted of all the physical children of Israel and any Gentiles who had closely associated themselves with the religion of Israel. This visible covenant community had both true believers and unbelievers, but still, it was a community chosen to enjoy the blessings and responsibilities of the covenants with Abraham, Moses, and David. This was the arena within which the people would find salvation.

Beyond this, a third category also dominated the prophets' thinking. The prophets knew that within the nation of Israel was an invisible community. This was the righteous remnant of God's people, the faithful who truly believed. And although they would go through difficult times, and although the remnant was often far from perfect, still, they had trusted Yahweh like Abraham, and they had been made righteous by their faith alone.

CONCLUSION

Whenever we read the prophets we must keep in mind these distinctions: those outside of the covenant, the visible covenant nation, and the invisible covenant people. We can avoid much confusion, and we can gain tremendous insights into the message of the prophets if we never forget these distinctions.

In this lesson, we've touched on a number of themes related to the way that prophets understood the people of the covenant. We've seen that they believed all people were bound to the Lord though covenants with Adam and Noah. But then, Israel had a very special relationship with God because of the covenants with Abraham, Moses, David, and even the new covenant in Christ. And then we've also noticed that the prophets made distinctions that we often don't make. They thought in terms of three kinds of people in the world: those outside the covenant, those unbelievers in the covenant, and then those who were true believers within the covenant. As we remember these distinctions and how the prophets understood the people of God, we will be able to understand and apply the prophetic word to our day as well.

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