

He Gave Us Prophets

Lesson 4

Dynamics of the Covenants

Manuscript



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Dynamics of the Covenants

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever noticed that human relationships have their ups and downs? Friendships are sometimes enjoyable and other times not enjoyable. Sometimes they're secure and other times insecure. We've seen in previous lessons that the prophets of the Old Testament were emissaries of God's covenant with his people, and to understand this emissarial function, we have to understand that the prophets realized that the relationship between Israel and God had its ups and its downs.

We've entitled this lesson the "Dynamics of the Covenants." In this lesson, we are going to look at three different topics: First, we will explore the covenant ideals. And second, we'll examine covenant judgment — how did the prophets minister on God's behalf when the people fell under divine judgment? And then third, we're looking to covenant blessings — how did prophets speak of blessings that God offered to his people? Grasping these dynamics of covenant life will help us understand Old Testament prophecy and how it applies to the church and the world today. What were the basic ideals of covenant life with Yahweh?

COVENANT IDEALS

Have you ever been to a wedding and heard all the wonderful things that the bride and groom say to each other? "To have and to hold, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer." Wouldn't it be strange to hear the bride and groom begin their marriages with vows that were less than ideal? Can you imagine hearing the man say to the woman, "I take you to be my wife, but it's really going to be hard to hold on if you get sick"? Or can you imagine the woman saying to the man, "I'll take you as my husband, but you'd better not let us get poor"? Well, we would wonder what was wrong with a couple who spoke like that to each other on their wedding day because we expect the beginning of a marriage to focus on ideals. It's a fresh relationship. It's a time when things are just like they're supposed to be. We all hope that the couple will remember the things they said to each other when the relationship was ideal.

Well, the prophets of the Old Testament knew something like this was true of the relationship between God and his people. They understood that there were certain ideals of the covenant relationship between God and Israel. Now to understand this ideal relationship, we have to look at two subjects: first, the basic ideal covenant structures; and then secondly, the prophetic ministries, or how the prophets relied on these structures.

COVENANT STRUCTURES

In earlier lessons, we saw that the Old Testament describes Yahweh's covenants with Israel as if they are patterned around the Ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaties. In the times of the Old Testament, great emperors would enter into treaties or covenants with smaller nations, and the Bible says that Yahweh entered into such a covenant with the nation of Israel. When emperors first entered into covenant treaties with their vassal nations, they began by declaring certain ideals that formed the basic structures of their political arrangements.

At least two components always appear in suzerain-vassal treaties. In the first place, Ancient Near Eastern treaties always affirmed the benevolence of the emperor toward his vassals. They declared the name of the great king and began with an historical account that enumerated all the great things the king had done for his people. Treaties were always based on the kindness of the emperor, and this theme of kindness from the emperor is true also in the Bible's ideal of covenant. The center of every divine covenant in the Bible was God's kindness toward his people.

There's another element in the ideals of covenants that we must never forget, and that's the element of human responsibility. Just like every suzerain-vassal treaty in the ancient world required loyalty from the subjects of the emperor, so it is that every single covenant in the Old Testament also required loyalty from the people of God. Now we always have to remember that the response of loyalty was always a response, a response to divine kindness — people did not earn their status before God. God established covenants with his people on the basis of his grace. But without exception, the ideals of the covenants always entail human responsibility — the requirement to live loyally before God.

At this point, we need to think about how each of these ideal elements enter into every Old Testament covenant. As we saw in the preceding lessons, Old Testament prophets understood that God entered into five covenant relationships. He established covenants with all the nations of the earth through Adam and Noah. And then he called Israel into a special relationship through covenants with Abraham, Moses and David, as well as a future new covenant in the latter days after the exile.

Think for a moment about the covenant with Adam. In the days of Adam, God's benevolence was displayed in the way he created the world for humanity. He took an uninhabitable, chaotic creation and shaped it into a wonderful garden in which humanity was to dwell. As we read in Genesis 1:2:

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the spirit of God was hovering over the waters (Genesis 1:2).

Then God made a paradise for his image and placed Adam and Eve within that paradise. This mercy was the basis upon which God entered into covenant with our first parents, Adam and Eve. At the same time, human responsibility was also required in the covenant ideal with Adam. God put Adam in the wonderful Garden of Eden, but he immediately set forth serious stipulations. In Genesis 2:16-17, we read these words:

You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die (Genesis 2:16-17).

Even in paradise, the covenant ideal included not just the benevolence of God, but also the responsibility of the human race.

Well, the same is true with the covenant with Noah. On the one hand, God mercifully rescued Noah and his family from the worldwide flood. As Genesis 6:7-8 puts it:

So the Lord said, “I will wipe out mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth.” ... But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord (Genesis 6:7-8).

The covenant with Noah was based on unmerited, divine mercy. Even so, the covenant that God made with Noah joins divine benevolence and kindness with human responsibility. When Noah came out of the ark after the flood, God set forth a number of explicit stipulations. In Genesis 9:7, God also reminded Noah of his basic human responsibility:

Be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it (Genesis 9:7).

Both divine mercy and human responsibility appear in the covenant with Noah.

Now let’s turn for a moment to the special covenants that God made with the nation of Israel. You’ll recall that the first covenant with Israel was through the patriarch, Abraham. God’s grace appears in this covenant because God chose this one family to be blessed above all the families on the earth. God showed great mercy toward Abraham when he said these words to him in Genesis 12:2-3:

I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all people on the earth will be blessed through you (Genesis 12:2-3).

Once again, divine grace is the central element in the covenant ideal. Nevertheless, human responsibility was also an essential part of the ideal of Abraham’s covenant. The patriarch’s responsibility comes to the foreground on many occasions. For instance, in Genesis 17:1-2, God says these words:

I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers (Genesis 17:1-2).

The Abrahamic covenant included human responsibility.

When it comes to God's covenant with Moses, many Christians today have a false impression. They believe that this covenant was centered around works, but it wasn't. And we can see this plainly in the fact that the Ten Commandments begin with a historical prologue much like the prologues of Ancient Near Eastern suzerain treaties. Before any commandments were given, in Exodus 20:2 we read these words:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery (Exodus 20:2, ESV).

God expected his people to obey him, but on the basis of his act of mercy in bringing them out of the land of Egypt. Of course, the other side of human responsibility also appears in the covenant with Moses. Exodus 19:5 says these words to Israel:

Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession (Exodus 19:5).

Divine grace was coupled with human responsibility in the ideal stage of the covenant with Moses.

Now, the royal covenant with David also focused on divine benevolence. God spoke to David in this way in 2 Samuel 7:8:

I took you from the pasture and from following the flock to be ruler over my people Israel (2 Samuel 7:8).

God chose David's family as the permanent dynasty over his people out of love, not because of some merit that he saw in David. David's dynasty was established because God was merciful to him. At the same time, God joined this display of grace to David with the requirement of human loyalty. Listen to the way the requirements of loyalty are set forth in Psalm 89:30-32:

If [David's] sons forsake my law and do not follow my statutes, if they violate my decrees and fail to keep my commands, I will punish their sin with the rod, their iniquity with flogging (Psalm 89:30-32).

God expected the sons of David to be faithful to him in recognition of the grace he had shown to them.

The two sides of the covenant ideal also appear in the new covenant, which the prophets predicted would come through the Messiah. The apostle Paul put it succinctly in Ephesians 2:8-10:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is a gift of God — not of works, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Grace is the basis of the covenant in Christ. But now listen to the words that follow in verse 10:

For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works,
which God prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:10).

The new covenant ideal also included the human responsibility of good works.

At this point, we should turn our attention to our second topic: how the prophets relied on these covenant structures.

PROPHETIC MINISTRY

On the one hand, the prophets constantly reminded the people of God of the mercies that Yahweh had shown them. At the same time, however, Old Testament prophets concentrated a lot of their attention on human responsibility in the covenant. They were called by God to approach the people and to remind them of the requirement of loyal service. We must always remember that the prophets knew there were both believers and unbelievers within the visible community of Israel. And for this reason, they treated human responsibility in the covenant as a testing or proving ground. The response of people toward the stipulations of the covenant showed the true nature of their hearts.

On the one hand, unbelievers within the visible community showed that they did not actually have saving faith because they would turn away from their covenant responsibilities. They failed to trust Yahweh for salvation, and they refused to give him their loyalty. These flagrant covenant violators would suffer the judgment of God. On the other hand, the test of human responsibility also identified those who were truly within the invisible covenant community. Now, these were people who were eternally redeemed. They had exercised saving faith in Yahweh, and they were on their way to eternal life. But the fact is that many times the prophets even challenged these people to prove their faith, much like the New Testament does. Listen to the words of Revelation 2:7:

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God (Revelation 2:7).

This kind of theme, that we must obey the Lord in order to prove that we genuinely do have saving faith, is a theme that runs throughout the prophets as well.

Now we have to be careful here not to think that the prophets were legalists simply because they emphasized human responsibility. The reality is that the prophets understood that God's grace was behind every act of obedience and faithfulness. We know this too from the whole teaching of scripture, that whenever people are faithful to the Lord, it's because the Spirit of the Lord is working within them. At the same time,

however, the Bible constantly reminds us of our responsibility to obey. And because the prophets knew that God's grace was behind every act of obedience, they did not hesitate to call God's people into obedience and faithfulness.

So far in our examination of the dynamics of the covenants, we have seen the two sides of the covenant ideal. At this point, we should turn our attention to our second topic, covenant judgment. What were the dynamics of covenant life when the people of God turned away from service to the Lord?

COVENANT JUDGMENT

There are many forms of human government throughout the world. But there's one thing in common with every single human government: they all recognize that the people of the land will not obey all of their laws, and as a result, they establish a system of crime and punishment. The same kind of thing was true in God's covenant with Israel. He knew that his people were sinners. He knew that they would rebel against him and so he also set up a system of judgment over his people. The prophets played a very important role in this system of judgment. They were messengers of the covenant. They brought to mind the crimes, and they also warned of the punishments that God would give to his people if they violated his covenant. Now, to understand how the prophets functioned as messengers of judgment, we need to understand two elements of covenant judgment that God held over his people. First, we'll explore the types of judgments that prophets announced, and second, we'll explore the process which these judgments would follow. Let's take a look first at the types of judgments that Old Testament prophets threatened against those who flagrantly violated their covenant with Yahweh.

TYPES OF JUDGMENT

It's very important to realize that Old Testament prophets did not invent the types of judgments that they threatened. On the contrary, they looked to the Scriptures of the Old Testaments for lists or catalogs of the kinds of judgments that the people of God should expect. The vocabulary of the prophets reveals that they often depended on passages that come from the books of Moses. There are five main passages that guided the prophets as they listed off the kinds of judgments that would come against the people of God: Deuteronomy 4:25-28, Deuteronomy 28:15-68, Deuteronomy 29:16-29, and Deuteronomy 32:15-43, and finally Leviticus 26:14-39 provided information to the prophets as they sought to understand the types of judgments that God would bring against his people. There is so much material in these passages that it is difficult to summarize what they say. But it is safe to say that Moses wrote these passages to convey to the nation that there were two basic categories of covenant judgment.

Judgment in Nature

The first type of covenant judgment is that God would respond to persistent sin with judgment in nature. God threatens to remove his blessing from the natural order so that the world would become hostile to the people of God. You'll recall that God brought Israel to a land flowing with milk and honey. The natural order in the Promised Land was going to be a tremendous blessing to the people of God. But the prophets warned that when Israel rebels, he will remove this blessing in judgment. Now, what kinds of natural judgments would come against the visible covenant community? Deuteronomy 4, 28, 29, and 32 as well as Leviticus 26 list at least six major types of natural judgments against the people of God. First, these chapters in the books of Moses tell us that God will sometimes send drought to the land of Israel. This drought would dry up the land so that the people will suffer tremendously, and there will be a pestilence. Famine will also come so that the people will have no food when they rebel flagrantly against the Lord. And disease will come upon them — they will receive fevers and boils and tumors and plagues. Wild animals will threaten human life and there will be a loss of population. Infertility and untimely death will decimate the animal and human population in the Land of Promise.

The prophets mentioned these kinds of covenant judgments time and again. They often warned that God was going to bring some natural disaster to disrupt life in the Promised Land. For example, listen to what God said in Haggai 1:9-11:

My house ... remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house. Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the oil and whatever the ground produces, on men and cattle, and on the labor of your hands (Haggai 1:9-11).

God often had his prophets announce that judgment was coming in the natural order.

Judgment in Warfare

Now in addition to judgment in nature, we also find that the prophets announced judgment in warfare. War often brings natural horrors, such as famine and disease, but God also spoke of sending human enemies against his people as a kind of covenant judgment. A number of warfare motifs appear in the writings of Moses. In Deuteronomy 4, 28, 29, 32 and Leviticus 26, we find at least five major categories of judgment in warfare. First, the people of God will suffer defeat. They will not be able to withstand the attacks of their enemies. Second, sieges will be laid against their cities. Cities will be surrounded by enemies and their inhabitants will suffer. Then there will be occupation of the land by enemies. The enemies of God's people will come into the Land of Promise and take control. Death and destruction is another covenant curse in warfare, because many of God's people will die at the hands of their enemies. And finally, the worse curse

of all — God says that his people will be taken captive and scattered among the nations in exile.

Time and again the prophets not only announced that the people of God would be defeated by their enemies, but they also warned that exile from the Promised Land was coming. For example, the prophet Micah warned that many Judaites would be exiled from the Land of Promise. In Micah 1:16 we can read these words of exile:

Shave your heads in mourning for your children in whom you delight;
make yourselves as bald as the vulture, for they will go from you in exile
(Micah 1:16).

Threats of judgment and warfare like these appear throughout the Old Testament prophets.

So we see that Old Testament prophets announced two basic types of covenant judgment: natural disasters and warfare. Now let's take a look at the process that God said he would follow as he imposed these kinds of judgments on his people.

PROCESS OF JUDGMENT

What processes of judgment did the prophets expect to take place? The prophets learned the process of judgment primarily from Leviticus 26:14-39. In this passage, Moses describes judgment as something that takes place over a long period of time and follows a particular pattern. As we examine this passage, we'll find at least three principles that govern the manner in which these judgments will come. God will show patience, but the judgments would increase in severity, and there will be a particular climax to these judgments. Let's think first about divine patience.

Divine Patience

Leviticus 26:14-39 makes it clear that God exercises great patience toward his people when they sin. God realizes that his people will rebel and that they will be stubborn, refusing to repent. So in this passage, Moses reveals that God will be very patient with his people. Leviticus 26 divides into five main sections: verses 14-17; 18-20; 21-22; 23-26; and 27-39. Each of these segments begins with God saying this: "If you will not listen to me..." and then he goes on to say what he will do to Israel in judgment. This repetition of "If you will not listen to me" shows that God intended to be patient with his people by giving them many opportunities for repentance.

One of the most succinct descriptions of the patience of God appears within Old Testament prophecy. The prophet Joel spoke of God's patience in Joel 2 when he called the people to repent. In 2:13, he said these words to Israel:

Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity (Joel 2:13).

The prophets believed very strongly in covenant judgment, but they also believed that Yahweh was very patient with his people.

The first principle of covenant judgment in Leviticus 26 is that God will be patient. But there is a second principle as well — God's covenant judgments will come with increasing severity.

Increasing Severity

Just as the five segments of Leviticus 26 tell us that God is patient, they also tell us that God will increase the severity of his judgments. In verses 18, 21, 24, and 28, God warns his people in this way: if they continue to rebel against him, then he will increase the judgments seven times over.

This dimension of Leviticus 26 tells us that covenant judgment comes in degrees. Sometimes the prophets warned of relatively small judgments, and then they later warned of greater judgments to come. For example, we read of one smaller judgment in the book of Isaiah 38:1:

Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover (Isaiah 38:1).

Now, I'm sure that Hezekiah himself thought this was a great covenant judgment against him, but in terms of the whole nation, it was rather small—it was just one individual suffering the judgment of God. But on the other hand, after Hezekiah refused to submit himself to Yahweh, even after a miraculous deliverance from the attacking Assyrians, Isaiah gave a much more severe judgment. He announced that one day the Babylonians would conquer the entire nation of Judah. In Isaiah 39:6, we read these words:

The time will surely come when everything in your palace ... will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left (Isaiah 39:6).

This statement was much more severe than the threat against Hezekiah about his personal health. It was a threat against the entire nation. And many prophets would follow this very same pattern. They would speak of increasing judgments.

Not only do we find that God brought covenant judgments with patience and increasing severity, but we also find a third principle: the climax of judgment is exile from the land.

Particular Climax

The last section of Leviticus 26:27-39 warns that the worst judgment to come against the people of God would be an utter devastation of the land and exile from the Land of Promise. Listen to the way Moses puts it in Leviticus 26:33:

I will scatter you among the nations and will draw out my sword and pursue you. Your land will be laid waste, and your cities will lie in ruins (Leviticus 26:33).

In the minds of Old Testament believers, it was hard to imagine anything worse than this. God had brought Israel to a Land of Promise, a land flowing with milk and honey, and now the prophets were announcing that there was going to be an exile from this land. By the time we come to most biblical prophets, God had already warned time and again that he was going to send his people out of the land. And so we find the prophets announcing that exile was coming. For example, in Amos 5:26-27, we read these words:

You have lifted up the shrine of your king, the pedestal of your idols, the star of your god — which you have made for yourselves. Therefore I will send you into exile (Amos 5:26-27).

Although Moses made the threat of exile very clear in Leviticus 26 and a number of other passages, the people of Israel still found it hard to believe. It was popular to believe that God would never utterly drive out his people—at least Jerusalem would remain intact. The people had forgotten that their covenant with Yahweh entailed human responsibility, and this is why even in the last years of Jerusalem's safety, Jeremiah had to proclaim that the destruction of the city and the temple was coming. In Jeremiah 7:13-15 we read these words:

While you were doing all these things, declares the Lord, I spoke to you again and again, but you did not listen; I called you, but you did not answer. Therefore, what I did to Shiloh I will now do to the house that bears my Name, the temple you trust in, the place I gave to you and your fathers. I will thrust you from my presence, just as I did all your brothers, the people of Ephraim (Jeremiah 7:13-15).

God is gracious and patient and kind to his people; it takes a long time to make him angry, but he can be provoked to anger. And so we discover that God does have judgment over his people, but it is a patient and a kind judgment that he exercises over his people.

So far in this lesson on the dynamics of the covenants, we have seen the covenant ideal and covenant judgment. Now let's look at the third element in our discussion: covenant blessings. How does God pour out his blessings on his people?

COVENANT BLESSINGS

Have you ever been in a friendship where the other person just won't let go? Maybe you've moved far away and the letters keep coming even after you forget to respond, or the phone call comes and it's your faithful friend again. Well, it's good to have friends like that, that stick with you throughout all of history. And the same was true for Yahweh and his relationship with Israel. The prophets knew that God would judge his people severely, but they also knew and proclaimed that Yahweh would never let go of his covenant people.

To explore this side of covenant life, we need to look at two considerations, just as we did in the examination of judgment. First, we'll look at the types of covenant blessing and then we'll look at the process of covenant blessing.

TYPES OF BLESSINGS

Blessings come to the people of God when they seek to be faithful to him. Of course, God does not expect his people to be perfect, but he does expect them to seek him sincerely, and not to rebel against him. When the people of the covenant are faithful in this way, God richly blessed them.

Blessing in Nature

The first category of blessing is blessing in nature. Just as Moses spoke of judgment in nature, he also spoke of blessing that would come in the natural realm. Moses revealed to Israel that God offered tremendous natural blessings if they would only serve him faithfully. This kind of motif appears in at least four ways in Deuteronomy 4, 28, 30, and Leviticus 26. First, Moses spoke of agricultural plenty. The fields would be full of crops if the people would be faithful to their Lord. Also, he speaks of livestock having fertility. The livestock would grow in great numbers if the people would serve the Lord faithfully. Health and prosperity would come to the people of God. They would enjoy general health and well-being, and in addition to this, the population would increase. The numbers of Israelites would increase so that they would fill the Land of Promise.

Announcements of blessings in nature shouldn't surprise us. When God first made humanity, he set us within a paradise — the Garden of Eden. But then God drove us out because of sin. When God's covenant people are faithful to him he promises to give them blessings, blessings in nature, so that they can experience the kinds of things God meant for the human race to have in the very beginning. Old Testament prophets spoke about the blessings of natural bounty in many ways. Listen to one example. In Joel 2:22-23 we read:

Do not be afraid, O wild animals, for the open pastures are becoming green. The trees are bearing their fruit; the fig tree and the vine yield their riches. Be glad, O people of Zion, rejoice in the Lord your God, for he has given you the autumn rains in righteousness (Joel 2:22-23).

In much the same way, Zechariah predicted that the people in his day would see the blessings of God when they obeyed the Lord. Zechariah 8:12 says these words:

The seed will grow well, the vine will yield its fruit, the ground will produce its crops, and the heavens will drop their dew (Zechariah 8:12).

Blessing in Warfare

Although the first type of covenant blessings focuses on natural bounty, a second major category appears time and again in the prophets, and this is blessing in warfare. Just as the people of the covenant suffered defeat in war when they were under God's judgment, they experienced victory and peace when they were under the blessings of covenant. This motif appears in at least four ways in Deuteronomy 4, 28, 30, and Leviticus 26. First, Moses tells the people of God that they would defeat their enemies. But beyond this, there would be an end to warfare; hostility with the nations would cease and there would be relief from all destruction. And, of course, there would be a return of any captives who had been taken away from the Land of Promise.

Old Testament prophets often spoke of these kinds of blessings in warfare. Listen to how Amos predicted a grand future of military success for the nation of Israel. In Amos 9:11-12, he said these words about the post-exilic period:

In that day I will restore David's fallen tent. I will repair its broken places ... and build it as it used to be, so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name (Amos 9:11-12).

In a world of hostilities and troubles, the prophet Amos announced that the house of David would have victory over all hostile enemies. And in much the same way, Micah in 4:3 announced that there would be great peace as a result of these victories:

They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore (Micah 4:3).

So we can see from these passages that the prophets oriented themselves toward the grace and the blessings of God. Although the prophets had much negative to say about judgment and about sin, the prophets also said that repentance and fidelity would lead to great blessings in nature and in war.

Now that we've seen the types of blessings which God would bring to his people, we should also look into the processes by which these blessings would come.

PROCESS OF BLESSINGS

Just as there was a process of judgment, so there is also a process of blessing as well. There are at least three principles that govern the process of divine blessing: first, blessings come through grace; and then blessings come in various degrees; and that there is a climax of the blessings of God.

Grace

All too often, modern Christians have the false impression that in the Old Testament people earned their salvation or earned their righteousness before God. But nothing could be further from the truth. The prophets did not offer men and women the way of salvation through works. They called on people to repent and to seek the mercy of God. In Hosea 14:1-2, we read these words:

Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God. Your sins have been your downfall! ... Say to him, "Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips" (Hosea 14:1-2).

Notice that Hosea did not say that his readers should work hard and earn the blessings of God. On the contrary, the faithful in Israel knew that only mercy from God would bring about blessings. They sought forgiveness as a basis of covenant blessing — not human merit.

Degrees

The second principle that governs covenant blessings is that they come in varying degrees. Just as judgments came in degrees, so we may speak of lesser and greater blessings. On the lower end of the scale, Old Testament prophets spoke of relatively small mercies from God. For example, just as Isaiah told Hezekiah he was going to become ill and die, he also announced a small blessing to the king when he told him that God would let him live. In Isaiah 38:5, God said:

Go tell Hezekiah, "This is what the Lord, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayers and seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life" (Isaiah 38:5).

A good number of prophecies focus on these personal or individual kinds of blessings. But many times, the prophets also turned their attention to the great national blessings that God would bring to his people. For example, in 701 the Assyrians attacked Judah and had come right to the gates of Jerusalem. In Isaiah 37:34-35, the prophet announced clearly that God would deliver the people from this great defeat:

“By the way that he came he will return; he will not enter this city,” declares the Lord. “I will defend this city and save it, for my sake and for the sake of David my servant!” (Isaiah 37:34-35).

This was a great blessing to the people of God because their very existence was being threatened and God said he would give them the blessing of victory in war. As we read Old Testament prophets, we must always be alert to the smaller and to the greater blessings which God announced to his covenant people.

Climax

In addition to divine grace and degrees of blessing, a third principle governs covenant blessings — the climax of the remnant’s restoration. Old Testament prophets believed that no matter how great a judgment might come, there would always be a remnant. Now, this remnant could be very large or it could be very small, depending on how the people reacted. But the prophets always said God would keep a remnant safe and would build on that remnant. For instance, Jeremiah said that Jerusalem would be utterly destroyed, but in Jeremiah 5:18, he assures the people that a remnant would survive:

“Even in those days,” declares the Lord, “I will not destroy you completely” (Jeremiah 5:18).

The survival of a remnant is important, because it was through a remnant that God promised to bring the greatest blessing of all to his people.

We have already seen from Leviticus 26 that the worst covenant curse was exile from the land. But in Leviticus 26:40-45, as well as Deuteronomy 4 and Deuteronomy 30, God promised that he would preserve a remnant, bring that remnant back to the land, and bless them even more than ever before. Listen to the way Moses put this matter in Deuteronomy 30:4-5:

Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather you and bring you back. He will bring you to the land that belonged to your fathers, and you will take possession of it. He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers (Deuteronomy 30:4-5).

This theme of remnant restoration appears throughout the prophets. For example, Jeremiah taught that after the exile God would give great natural blessings to his remnant. In Jeremiah 23:3, Jeremiah reported these words from God:

I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and I will bring them to their pastures where they will be fruitful and increase in number (Jeremiah 23:3).

In much the same way, after exile, the remnant would also receive a great blessing in warfare. The prophet Joel taught that when the people of God came back, this remnant would experience a great victory and enduring peace. In Joel 3:9, we read these words:

Proclaim this among the nations: Prepare for war! Rouse the warriors! Let all the fighting men draw near and attack (Joel 3:9).

But then in 3:17, we read of Israel's victory:

Then you will know that I, the Lord your God, dwell in Zion, my holy hill. Jerusalem will be holy; never again will foreigners invade her (Joel 3:17).

Joel spoke of a great victory in battle that would establish Israel as safe forever.

All Old Testament prophets looked forward to the restoration of the remnant of God's people. God promised that despite the greatest punishment of exile, the remnant would receive the greatest blessing of restoration.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we've explored how the prophets understood the dynamics of covenants and we've seen three main topics: First, the ideals of divine benevolence and human responsibility. And then we've also seen how the prophets warned of judgment from an individual level all the way to the grand judgment of national exile. And then finally, we've also seen that God would redeem his people both in small ways and then through a remnant, bring a grand restoration after the exile. These themes, these dynamics guided the Old Testament prophets in all they said, and these themes must also guide us as we study the Old Testament prophets.

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GLOSSARY

Abraham – Old Testament patriarch, son of Terah, father of the nation of Israel with whom God made a covenant in Genesis 15 and 17 promising innumerable descendants and a special land

Adam – The first man; husband of Eve; man with whom God made the covenant of foundations in which humanity was to fill and subdue the earth

covenant – A binding legal agreement made between two people or groups of people, or between God and a person or group of people

David – Second Old Testament king of Israel who received the promise that his descendant would sit on the throne and reign forever

Hezekiah – Son of Ahaz and king of Judah from approximately 716-686 B.C., known for his religious reforms and miraculous deliverance from Assyrian aggression in 701 B.C.

Moses – Old Testament prophet and deliverer who led the Israelites out of Egypt; man with whom God made a national "covenant of law" and who administered the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant to the Israelites; also appeared with Elijah at Jesus' transfiguration

new covenant – The covenant of fulfillment in Christ; first mentioned in Jeremiah 31:31

Noah – Man who, under God's direction, built an ark and survived the Flood; individual with whom God made a universal covenant that promised the enduring stability of nature

Promised Land – The land that God promised to give as an inheritance to Abraham and his descendants

prophet – God's emissary who proclaims and applies God's word, especially to warn of judgment against sin and to encourage loyal service to God that leads to blessings

remnant – Term used in the Bible to refer to a group of faithful Israelites who would be spared the judgment that would come upon the unfaithful

suzerain-vassal treaty – A covenant arrangement made between a conquering emperor and a lesser ruler

Ten Commandments – Commandments given to Moses by God on Mount Sinai; expressions of God's eternal law that transcend all culture and times; also called *The Decalogue*