

The Voices of the Prophets

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of hearing and understanding the voices of the prophets, which ultimately point to Jesus Christ, and warns against spiritual declension, religious formalism, moral degeneration, commercial obsession, and pending disaster.

Scripture: Isaiah 6:9-10, Jeremiah 1:5, Jeremiah 2:13, Jeremiah 2:23, Jeremiah 2:35, Jeremiah 7:28, Acts 13:27, Hebrews 1:1, Revelation 2:7-29

Topics: "Hearing God's Voice", "The Role of Prophets"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of recognizing the voices of the prophets, as many hear the Scriptures without understanding their deeper meaning. He warns that the tragic outcome of ignoring these voices leads to spiritual blindness and a failure to recognize Christ, the central message of the prophets. The sermon highlights the importance of spiritual hearing and the consequences of failing to discern God's voice, particularly in the context of Jeremiah's prophetic ministry. Sparks draws parallels between Jeremiah's time of spiritual decline and the present day, urging believers to heed the warnings and messages of the prophets. Ultimately, the measure of our faith is determined by how much of Christ is reflected in our lives.

Transcript

"They knew not... the voices of the prophets which are read every sabbath" (Acts 13:27).

"God having... spoken... in the prophets... in divers manners" (Hebrews 1:1).

Our object in these chapters will be to see what those divers voices and manners of God's speaking mean for us in our time and our lives: not a fullscale study of the Prophets, but just the salient message for our instruction, comfort, guidance and - perhaps - warning.

The statement made by the Apostle Paul in the first quotation above is a very astonishing and arresting one, and itself becomes a message and a warning from the Prophets. It says precisely that on every Sabbath day, over a long period of years, the Prophets were read in the hearing of a people, in a great centre like Jerusalem, and in numerous synagogues far and wide, and, while the words were read and heard, and while the Prophets were speaking through the mouths of priests and synagogue-rulers, the people and their rulers "knew not the voices of the prophets". Words, Scriptures, sounds, times without number, but the 'Voice' undiscerned and undetected; that inner meaning, that vital message, that one

inclusive Object unrecognized. But not only so. The tragic result of all the hearing was a violent, positive and grievous contradiction; a doing indeed, but a doing of just the opposite of what the Prophets meant for the people concerned. They should have profited by the 'voices', but they were condemned.

Thus, at the very outset, we are challenged as to the result, of all our hearing and the value of all that has come to us. What will the verdict be when the 'voices' are no longer to be heard? It is, however, important that we are aware of the issue upon which the final judgment and verdict will rest. From many Scriptures, and focused in Hebrews 1:1, that issue is clearly stated to be the place and measure given to Jesus Christ, God's Son. This is the consummate issue in our basic quotation of Acts 13:27: "They knew him not". Jesus said that all the Prophets spoke of Him. The Prophets had much to say about many things: idolatry, bad moral conditions, formal and merely external religion, etc., but Jesus saw and pointed to Himself in all the Prophets, and at last made the significance of the Prophets a personal one as to Himself. All judgment ultimately will turn, not upon sins, more or less, few or numerous, but upon the place and measure given to Christ. Thus the issue bound up with hearing the Prophets, i.e. the Scriptures, is: how much of Christ is resultant in us. Not one or many of the things which comprise Christianity, but the degree of Himself in us. In the Old Testament Prophets it is the place of Christ. In the New Testament it is firstly the place, and then the measure.

All the New Testament Letters (Epistles) are primarily concerned with the measure of Christ in believers, individually and corporately. This final outcome is, according to Acts 13:27 and other Scriptures (such as Isaiah 6:9,10, and Revelation 2:7,11,17,29, etc.), a matter of spiritual hearing, or "an ear to hear what the Spirit saith". How many, like those referred to above, hear the Scriptures as such, maybe "every sabbath", but fail to hear 'the voice'. It is with the object of catching the voice of the Prophets that we essay to consider them and their message. This preliminary word is important so that it will not be just and only 'the letter of the Word'.

Let us note that the failure and its consequences on the part of the people referred to was not because the Prophets were not faithful. While it may be true in many cases that the people are in a tragic or pathetic position because their teachers and leaders are not faithful, this is not always the case. That a child at school does not pass the examinations cannot always be honestly blamed upon the teacher. The child may be lazy, indolent, careless, or rebellious. The best and most painstaking teacher has his - or her - failures. The Prophets gave all that they had, but still the terrible verdict of Acts 13:27 was true. The blame rested upon the hearers.

1. The Voice of Jeremiah

It will be seen that in our commencing with the Prophet Jeremiah we are not in the biblical order. We are not here concerned with the history, geography, nor the chronology of the Prophets, but primarily with the spiritual message. The change in order is simply because, at the moment, we are pressed with the sense that Jeremiah comes nearer to the heart of personal spiritual need. Here it is the man himself, in his own suffering, that dominates the book. Isaiah and Ezekiel have nations, rulers, the making of history (for a long time to come) and the predictive and Messianic vision so much in view, while Jeremiah has less of these features, and is so very largely burdened with the present and immediate course of things. This is not by any means the whole truth, but is comparative. The thing which impresses the reader above all else is the personal distress of the Prophet, whatever he may say about nations in chapters 40 to 51.

The message comes really out of the Prophet himself. This is true of all Prophets, as we shall see. The personality of Jeremiah is more in view than is the case of any of the other Major Prophets and many of the - so-called - Minor. Through his personality great truths were converted in spiritual life. While much may be said of the same nature regarding the other Prophets, of Jeremiah, perhaps it is true to say that no man was ever more - if as much - integrated with his message than was Jeremiah. It was literally wrung out of him like the juice crushed out in the wine-press.

Let it be here remembered that the function of the Prophets was pre-eminently to keep clearly and powerfully before men what God is like. If we keep this in mind we shall have the key to each Prophet. God is vari-sided. It has been said that "There are grounds for believing that the Figure of the Suffering Servant of the Lord, raised by the Great Prophet of the Exile, and the idea of the atoning and redemptive value of His sufferings were, in part at least, the results of meditation upon the spiritual loneliness on the one side, and upon the passionate identification of himself with the sorrows of his sinful people on the other side, of this the likeliest to Christ of all the Prophets." Certainly Jeremiah foreshadowed the Greater than he Who was "A man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief". We have said that God is vari-sided. Perhaps it would be better to say that God is love, and love - especially God's love - is many-sided. There is the sorrow of love; the jealousy of love; the wrath of love; the insight and understanding of love; yes, and the hatred of love; etc. Jeremiah was the embodiment of the sorrows of love - God's love.

Before we go further into the causes and reasons for God's sorrow, we will look at the man himself, his call, and his vocation. There is so much here to help any servant of the Lord who has to take an unpopular way, plough a lonely furrow, stand against a strong adverse current, and bear an unwelcome testimony. Jeremiah can be a great inspiration to all such.

We cannot do better than give some extracts from a most helpful "Introduction" to Jeremiah by the late Dr. Alexander Stewart. Dr. Stewart wrote:

"Jeremiah would have inherited the tradition of an illustrious ancestry, and his early life would have been moulded by the distinctive religious influences of the community to which he belonged. God, however, had 'provided some better thing' for him than to spend his days in serving at the altars of a proscribed and degenerate priesthood. The young son of Hilkiah had been appointed to the tremendous destiny of being a prophet of the Lord in one of the most testing hours in the history of His chosen people....

"That word (of the Lord) made known to him, first of all, that he had been chosen by God for the prophetic ministry before he ever saw the light of this world (Jer. 1:5). The word which constituted his ordination to office revealed to him at the same time his foreordination to that high honour. Nor was this all. The Divine disclosure also made mention of a preparation for the tasks which were to engage his strength, a preparation which stretched away into the mysterious past, till, in its starting-point at least, it bore the seal of eternity, and included gifts of... spiritual consecration which preceded the discipline of his conscious experience.... His work was to be unusually extensive in its activities, and for the most part intensely painful in its character... his commission was 'to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build and to plant'. The two closing terms indicate a generative purpose... but by far the greater part of his work was to be of a destructive nature. Both these ends were, of course, to be achieved by Jeremiah as the instrument of the resistless energies of the Lord.

"A second outstanding fact in connection with Jeremiah's call is his own shrinking from the task with which he was faced. 'Ah, Lord God!' he cried, 'behold I cannot speak, for I am a child' (1:6). He was, of course,

no mere child in the literal sense, for he must have been more than twenty years of age; but he felt himself a child in knowledge and experience, and he was specially apprehensive of unfitness for the prophetic office on the ground of a conscious lack of the gift of utterance....

"It is a striking illustration of the mysterious working of the sovereign will of God that He should have chosen as 'a prophet unto the nations' a man so apparently unfitted by temperament and aptitude for that tremendous task.

"A third feature of vital significance in Jeremiah's call is the special equipment which he received for his life work. This equipment was symbolised by the touch of the Divine hand on his mouth, an action which was accompanied by the explanatory assurance, 'Behold I have put my words in thy mouth' (2:9)....

"Jeremiah's equipment included also a message from the Lord which was particularly adapted to his need. It consisted, first of all, of a word of command in answer to his protestation of unfitness (1:7). The twice repeated 'Thou shalt', of this solemn charge - 'Thou shalt go', and 'Thou shalt speak' - swept aside the young prophet's objections, and made it plain to him that he must subject himself unreservedly to the authority of his Divine Master, with respect alike to the sphere of his labour and to the character of his message. But the word of command was followed by a word of gracious encouragement: 'Be not afraid of their faces; for I am with thee, to deliver thee.' Hostile faces there certainly would be in plenty - brows lowered in resentment, eyes flashing in hatred, and lips curled in scorn or clamorous in denunciation; but here was a promise of the Lord's own presence throughout all the days, and in that fact there lay for Jeremiah a guarantee of strength and protection amid all the difficulties and dangers of his future ministry. The prophet certainly needed a full share of courage, for few men have ever been confronted with a more formidable task."

If we give some attention to the times in which our Prophet had to fulfil his ministry we shall better understand its difficulties, and perhaps we shall not fail to recognize some similarities to our own times, thus giving stronger point to the "Voice".

The features of Jeremiah's time (also true as to all the Prophets) were:

1. Spiritual declension

The lowering and lessening of truly spiritual standards and values. The loss of the inner and heavenly meaning of Divine things.

2. Religious formalism

Religion, yes. All the externals, forms and techniques were there. The Scriptures had been lost, but a tradition - of sorts and in measure - still obtained. But the religion went in one pocket and vital application to life went through the hole in the other. Jeremiah - speaking as God - said: "They have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and have hewn them out cisterns, broken cisterns, which can hold no water."
(Italics ours.)

3. Moral degeneration

There was a perfect landslide of moral standards in the nation. The vehemence of the hatred demonstrated against the Prophet was largely due to his high standard of spiritual and moral purity, and that vehemence showed how far the nation had gone in this moral degeneration.

4. Commercial obsession

The criterion of success had become that of material and commercial gain. Here there had taken place a satanic twist and distortion. Whereas material prosperity and advancement were a mark of the blessing of God in that old dispensation, as the token of Divine approval of faithfulness to His covenant and word, now the gain had become divorced from holy living. Thus, the world and its business had become the enemy of the spiritual life and sapped it away. The cunning lie of the great deceiver was that if you had means, money, possessions, etc., you could serve God with it. But the Prophets said "No, never!" God said "Away with it; I will take no sheep from your flock nor ox from your stall. Your gold and silver are polluted."

"Big business", commercial engrossment, can become a fascination, an obsession, and the thief of spiritual increase.

5. Pending disaster

There were ominous signs all around. Nations were warring and restless. One after another kingdoms were falling. New powers rose on the ashes of old. The air was full of threats. The only resort for any survival was greater fierceness and violence. Disaster was no stranger to consciousness. No one had any sense of security or assurance of an indefinite tenure of life. This condition, being specially focused upon Jerusalem, was reacted to by a false and bolstered-up "courage", foolhardiness and presumption. Thus Jeremiah, who kept the pending judgment in view, was charged with being a traitor and thrown into a dungeon to silence him. His warnings had been met with faces harder than a rock (2:23,35; 7:28). Guilt was repudiated, and correction rejected.

There, for the present, we must leave the matter, and come back to consider more fully the ministry of the Prophet. This "Voice" surely has something - even thus far - to say to any hard-pressed witness for Christ and servant of the Lord. The value will - of course - only be derived by such as are sometimes tempted - like Jeremiah - to lose heart and feel the impossibility of the situation.

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