

Week 28 – Tough Questions – “How Can We Understand Prophecy Today?”

Tim Perry here. It's now Week 28 of Tough Questions. This week, what I thought would be good for us to do is take a little time and talk about prophecy and prophets and how to read them.

If you happen to have one of those *Project 4:4 Reader's Guide*, there's a cool chart in there that I'm going to show you – plus I've got a few more resources that you might find really helpful.

We've got a bit of a challenge when we talk about the prophets because there are two really big questions that prophecy raises for us. One is this – if the prophets spoke about stuff that was way off in the future from their day and age – how was it that anybody listening to them in their timeframe got anything out of their message? We look at these prophecies and we say, well – I can tell that's talking about Jesus or that's talking about some point in time that I can relate to – but that's because I'm on this side of that part of the salvation timeline. How could those people back then have gotten anything meaningful out of a prophet saying, “Hey – somebody is coming hundreds of years in the future that you've never met and you'll never meet – but be encouraged anyway.”

Well, the other way to look at it is this – what if the pendulum swings too far in the other direction? If prophets only spoke to the people in their day and age, how are we supposed to make anything of their message today? Well, it's my claim that scripture can accomplish both things. It can speak to the people in that timeframe as well as show those people something that's coming down the pike for them that they can be encouraged with. Even the modern reader of scripture today, has prophecies that they can look at in the Bible that haven't been fulfilled from our vantage point either – so it keeps us looking forward.

Well, let me show you a timeline of the prophets and a little bit of a chart to help you orient where they come from and who they're ministering to. This is one of the charts that you'll find in the *Project4:4 Reader's Guide*, and it helps us see that prophets were not only in the nation of Israel or the Northern Ten Tribes, but prophets also spoke in Judah. So one of the key questions that we can ask is – “Is this a prophet speaking to us in Judah or Israel?” Now you remember that there was a big dividing line here in this part of the timeline that tells us that Israel was one nation off by itself to the north and Judah was a separate nation off to the south. It was a split divided people. So one question we can ask right away when we're reading these prophecies is – “Is this someone speaking in Judah or is this someone speaking in Israel?”

Also, when you look at the timeline, there's a little bit of a challenge regarding the exile. One question you'll want to ask yourself – “Is this a prophet writing before, during or after the exile?” And we answer that question differently depending whether they're in the north or in the south – right?

In the north, we'll remember that it's 722 BC – that's a key date. That's when the northern tribes went into exile. So you'll notice on our little chart here – after 722 BC, there are no more prophets to prophecy to the people in Israel because Israel isn't there anymore. All the prophets after 722 BC are over here in Judah and doing their prophetic ministry in that part of Israel.

The second date on this chart to keep aware of is 586 BC, and that's when Judah also experienced the exile. So you'll notice that in the that period – after that point in time – there's no more differentiation between Judah or Israel – they're just called Jews – Jews of the Diaspora – Jews that were dispersed. Then you'll notice way down here on the bottom of the chart – the prophets that prophesied during the exile and after the exile. So you can just notice by looking at the chart that the majority of the prophets came to the south in Judah, they had the longest history of unbroken territory being settled in the south – so most of the prophets spoke to them. A few of the prophets spoke to the north and to their tribes. Then some of these prophets down here – Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi – they ministered after the period of time that we call the exile when the Jews from wherever they could come back to – were on their way back to Jerusalem and to Israel.

So another question we might ask, too, about the prophets is – “As they're speaking – as they're giving their words of prophecy – are they speaking that prophecy even to the nation of Israel or are they giving it to a surrounding nation?” Some of the prophets directed their message to Assyria. Nahum, for example, is a prophecy against Assyria – it's not talking about Israel at all.

So those are a few things to keep in mind that will help you stay oriented as to who this prophet is, where he's coming from and who he's speaking to.

Here are a few other facts about the prophets that will help you as you read. First of all, the prophet was a spokesperson from God. It was a person who God uniquely authorized to tell God's people something of great importance. So they spoke from that vantage point. Most of their message was readily understandable by the immediate audience. We read some of these prophecies and we go, wow – I don't get what he means or what he's getting at. When those prophets spoke – the people in their day and age understood exactly where they were coming from.

The prophet spoke what was called an oracle – that's just a basic unit of thought that a prophet would utter, and it would be something that the audience could sink their teeth into and chew on and say – “What does that mean?” In other forms of literature – the basic unit of literature is maybe a scene if it's a narrative or something like that, but when you're reading prophecy – just bear in mind that instead of coming at you in paragraphs, the message is coming at you in poetic chunks that we call oracles.

Another thing to keep in mind is that these prophets didn't really have a dynasty to them. It's not like a prophet would give birth to another prophet in his family

lineage – these prophets seemed to come out of nowhere. They seem to come not out of the royal lineage of the day - they weren't born to the Levites or the priestly class. They could come from anywhere and step on the stage of salvation history because they were authorized and empowered by God. They weren't put there by virtue of their family upbringing.

Here's a few statistics to keep in mind about the literature that we call prophecy in the Bible. Less than 5% of the Old Testament prophetic literature even refers to the New Testament. So you say what's the 95% of prophecy about then? Well, it's about the people and events in more immediate geopolitical and historical context to that prophets own day and time.

Less than 2% of the prophecy that does refer to the New Testament refers specifically to Jesus. Then less than 1% of predictive prophecy in the Bible is yet to be fulfilled. So some things paint a picture of a vision of, let's say, the new heavens and the new earth. Well, that hasn't happened yet. There are prophecies about that in both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

So just to clear things up – prophecy is something that's used in the Bible to communicate to God's people – something of very practical importance to them and their relationship with God, and part of that is flavored with these promises of things coming in the future. But it's not like all prophecy statements are predictive statements about events that are going to come true in the future. The prophet was God's spokesperson to tell God's people, "Hey, I'm here to remind you of how important your relationship with God is. You need to live in step with God and what's he's doing."

Here are a few other tips then when you're reading the prophets. First of all, remember that prophets spoke to God's people in their own day and time. A lot of people get in trouble by reading into what a prophet is saying in the Old Testament something that they see out of the New Testament or something that they see in current events in our day and age and they're missing the point entirely. A much simpler point is being made to that author's immediate literary audience and not necessarily intended to say something specific to us today.

There was great variety in their message as well. Some of the prophets spoke verbal messages. Some of the prophets like Hosea actually did prophetic actions – things that they did caught everyone's attention and turned into a message from God by virtue of how shocking their act was. So Hosea, for example, was a man of God who was told by God to go marry a prostitute. So that very act becomes a form of prophecy being spoken to God's people to tell them – "Hey, you are not being faithful to God. You're being as faithless as somebody committing adultery."

Some prophecies were actually positive and re-enforced what God was noticing among God's people that they were doing right, and some prophecies were actual statements of judgment that if Israel didn't keep their end of the bargain in their

relationship with God that rested on the promise that we call the covenant – then there were going to be consequences for their unfaithfulness.

Remember this – the prophets spoke on the authority that God gave them so they didn't need a lot of credentials. They didn't need to be born from a special family. They didn't have to know the law and be trained in a law like a Rabbi. They could just step on the stage of human history and under God's unique enablement could speak their message.

Then the last tip here is that as you read the Old Testament prophets, bear in mind that in the New Testament, you're going to see an incredible amount of fulfillment taking place. It may not be literal fulfillment of a specific focus prophecy that was declared that something is going to take place at some point of time in the future, but it was God's promises given to his people in the Old Testament coming true – being fulfilled through the person of Jesus in the New Testament.

Well, I just want to mention to you that if you look at the link below this video, you'll see a handout that has all of this information summarized on it for you. I would advise you to print that off and stick that inside your Project 4:4 Bible as you read and let it be a guide to helping you understand the prophets

If you've got any other questions and you just want to hit on the link and reply to this video, that would be great. I'll answer them and dialogue with you on line. Thanks so much for being with me.