

# The Mission of Prophecy

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Date: 30 October 2016

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[ 0 : 00 ] Now will you turn back with me if you have a Pew Bible to page 581 to Isaiah chapter 19 or whether you have it on your smartphone or any other means of following the passage.

This is a meaty passage, okay? We're going to need our spiritual forks and knives out today and we're going to have to participate in this meaty sermon.

Okay, I need you to concentrate because we're breaking into a passage of scripture that has a whole lot of background to it and we're going to have to very quickly try and assimilate that so that we understand what is happening here and how it fits in with the unfolding of God's mission that is revealed in scripture.

Now we've been looking at that over the last number of weeks. The unfolding mission, we're still in the Old Testament and we're looking at the unfolding mission of God. The way that God just drips feeds us again and again his purposes and his plans that are ultimately fulfilled in Jesus and we can see in the Old Testament all of these passages point us forward to the work the finished work of Jesus Christ.

And over these last weeks we've seen that the mission of God includes a personal rescue. These come to redeem people. These come to save us and we've seen that as being significant.

[ 1 : 41 ] But I hope we've also recognised that it isn't simply a personal, private, individual salvation that we have purposed and planned by God so that, you know, it's just what I do in my own heart.

And nothing else really matters. I've got this quiet relationship with God and what's happening in the world is just chaos. But God has a purpose for me. But we've seen that it's more than that.

We've seen that there's national implications to what God is doing and there's international implications and cosmic implications.

We remember our study previously where we saw the purpose of God is to unite all things on heaven and on earth under Christ. That is the great purpose that we're looking.

We're not just living for today because we're looking forward to new heavens and a new earth wherein dwells righteousness. There's a cosmic element. There's an environmental element.

[ 2 : 48 ] There's a national element. There's a cultural element as well as a personal one. And what we've seen before is that that's a challenge to us to make to remind us of the bigness of God.

One of our greatest problems is we're always shrinking God. We want to shrink him so much that it can fit into our back pocket. Let's take him out when we need him.

Maybe at Christmas or when we're in trouble or when we need a wee bit of comfort and he's rubbed in the back. We bring him out. But he's a small God, manageable, controllable, understandable, someone that we can just keep to ourselves.

And yet what we're reminded of in the Word of God is this huge, massive purpose and plan that is cosmic in its implications as well as personal.

And of course the personal side is hugely important, isn't it? Because it reminds us we're not insignificant. That our troubles and our battles and our problems are not invalid to God.

[ 3 : 52 ] But he's interested and he cares and he is big enough to deal with the smallness of our lives as well. It's a challenge to our parochial world view.

To just thinking our lives are simply about Edinburgh. Our lives are simply about our day tomorrow. Our lives can go no further than that small view that we have.

And it's a reminder that we are safe and secure as believers. And act with a great God, with a powerful, loving friend who has a purpose for the universe we live in.

And I think as we've been, I hope, or maybe not trying to avoid the news in the last few weeks and months, whether it be with Brexit or whether it be with the American elections or whether it be with Syria, and all the chaos and the horror and the misery and the questions that it brings up in our

minds, that we are reminded, however chaotic it looks, God is sovereign and God is working through his purpose.

And I hope that we'll see a little bit of that today. And I do require your intellect and your brain and your soul and your spirit and your involvement in this, because it's kind of not a chapter we would normally necessarily look at very comfortably.

[ 5 : 16 ] The context is this prophecy of Isaiah. He's one of the great Old Testament prophets. And the prophets are great. And the prophets in the Bible were set apart by God to speak on God's behalf.

They were there to reveal God's mind and God's will, both for their immediate audience and also forward as it becomes part of God's word and God's future.

So God speaks through the prophets and makes God known to the people present and future. And so Isaiah is coming to God's people, the people of Israel, with a message.

He's speaking to them and also declaring truth that is very significant for the nations round about.

Because by this stage, God's people, remember we've seen it before, they've been freed from Egypt, they've been brought, they've travelled in the desert, they've been escaped through the Red Sea and they've been brought into land of milk and honey and their God's people with their own purpose and their own land.

But by this stage, they've screwed up royally. They're in a complete mess as a people. They are divided and defeated and idolatrous.

[ 6 : 37 ] They've turned away from this great, loving, caring, personal God who's redeemed them. The 12 tribes have already been split and the 10 northern tribes are already in captivity to the Assyrian, the powerful Assyrian world power of the time.

Godless, secular, violent, oppressive, hugely powerful nation of Assyria. Judah, representing the two tribes in the south, clustered around Jerusalem.

They remain in the Promised Land but they're just themselves in a mess. And they're threatened not only by Assyria but also by the uprising nation of Empire of Babylon.

Okay, let's get a short history lesson, biblical history lesson, stay with me because the significance is important to the story. And part of the problem for God's people here in Judah is the mess they're in rather than looking to God for answers, rather than crying out to God, rather than returning back to God, they've decided to try and make an alliance with Egypt.

How ironic is that? Egypt, which by this stage is a declining world power, it's also the nation that oppressed them and enslaved them and from whom they received deliverance from God.

[ 8 : 09 ] But in chapter 31 and verse 1, we have this complaint from God about the people, woe to those who go down to Egypt for help and rely on horses who trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the Lord.

That's the core of the grievance that God had with the people, that they weren't coming back to Him, they weren't looking to Him. And He gives this oracle, this prophecy concerning Egypt, to say, look, don't trust in Egypt, don't make an alliance with Egypt.

I've got my own purposes for Egypt, which I'm going to tell you about. You need to return to me.

And so we're going to look at that prophetic picture in chapter 19 and recognise what God is saying. Because the first section that we have, basically verses 1 to 15, are God bringing a message of judgment against this nation of Egypt.

It's a picture of Egypt being wrecked under God. So that God is a purpose, not just for Israel, but he's a purpose for all the nations and Egypt is part of that.

[ 9 : 36 ] And what we see in this chapter, certainly in the first 15 verses, is the consequences of a nation or a people, hand individuals, because it works the same way, of living without reference to God, of spiritual autonomy.

It's the kind of outworking of the people of Babel that we looked at earlier on in the series, saying, look, we're not going to live by God's standards, we're not going to live as if we need God.

We can manage, we can become powerful and world beaters on our own, we don't need God. And so what we see with Egypt in its history is that a short-term prosperity, things went very well, they were a world power, but this principle of atrophy coming in, that is this principle of decline, of destruction, of self-destruction coming in.

And what we have here is a picture of God allowing this to happen and even accelerating that with His judgment. In other words, God is saying, okay, you've chosen to go on your own, then this is what will happen to you.

But then he says, okay, you've chosen to go on your own, I'm going to actually involve myself in this and make the miserable consequences worse, quicker.

[10:57] Because he wants to bring them to their knees. He wants to bring them to recognise the folly of living without Him.

There are His enemies here, they're against Him. And we see what happens when a nation, a people, a collective, but also individuals choose to stick their fingers up at God and live without Him. There may be prosperity, it may be short-term, it may be quite long-term, God is sovereign over that.

But in this nation we see that there's the beginnings of collapse. And so there's social collapse in verses 2 and 4, we see them fighting against one another and instead of going to God for healing, they're going to necromancers and to the occult and to try and find some answers there.

There's economic collapse, we see that the Nile dries up and the fishing industry and the agricultural industry as it's spoken of here and the clothing industry is all destroyed because they don't have the raw material, they don't have the water and the basic economic resources they need. And in verses 12 to 15 we're told about the political collapse of the country of Egypt. Wise men are foolish and the wisdom they bring is useless and ultimately we find that Egypt is going to be handed over to a dictator, verse 4 speaks about that.

[12:38] And the image that God uses of this collapse, national collapse as it's primarily here is of a drunken guy staggering about in his own vomit.

That's the picture he gives. That he says is the end, that's the final outworking of living without reference to your Creator and Lord and God nationally, internationally and personally.

We're staggering, we're pitiful, we're lost. We're damnable at that level and that's the prophetic picture that we're given of here.

And there's a wider implication for that. I think in our own lives there's a wider implication both personally and as we think of the world that we live in nationally also and I think it's important for us to consider that, that our temptation is always just to be lords of our own lives.

It's always to leave God out of the picture. That's the natural inclination of our hearts that we can do things in our own. We don't need God in our lives. We don't need His love, we don't need His grace. And God's reminding us here that if we choose to live autonomous lives the longer term implications will be like atrophy, will be destructive, it will be self-destructive and it will be unhelpful in our lives and disastrous ultimately in our lives.

[14:24] Living without God is a disaster for us. I think we've seen that. I'm not very happy about making parallels between what's happened in the Bible in the Old Testament and what's happening politically in the world which we live in today.

But there surely must be some implication and some way in which we recognise that even nations, although nations aren't covenant under God today, recognise nonetheless that if nations choose ultimately to only live in a secular way and govern in a secular way and live without God and without His morality and without the recognition of His lordship over them and their humility as leaders then it will lead to declension.

And we have seen throughout history the rise and fall of nations. We've seen it all through history. We have never long term blossomed with political power and with political independence and with godless rule because it becomes self-destructive, it becomes self-possessive, it becomes greedy and it becomes immoral.

And in the natural way, that's the natural direction that happens. And I do wonder whether our nation and the United States and maybe other nations in the western first world are the great nations that will not be great again in the short term.

We append these names, we're seeing all the time in the American election and we've also seen it with the whole Brexit thing, about greatness and the importance of how significant and important we are as nations and yet are we?

[16:12] In the history of the world, the said nations rise and fall. It's the time for the East. Maybe that's what God is reminding us that this is not random, this is not just happening out with God's control, but God is, as He was dealing with Egypt and as we're going to see in Syria, He is also dealing with the nations today and He has great ongoing purposes because, and I'm glad to move

on, that's not the end of the story.

What we have in this amazing chapter is not just the destruction, prophesied, of this great power, but we have God's purposes at work. So through this prophecy, we see the mission of God beginning to unfold again and we see not only that Egypt is wrecked, as it were, through its own folly and through God's intervention and judgment, but also is redeemed by God, Egypt, the great enemy of God's people.

And this is a prophecy that would have caused Isaiah to gulp. What? Our great enemy, not only Egypt, but as Syria, are part of God's loving and gracious and redeeming purpose.

No way, God. No way. We've been shocking for Israel to hear this message in Judah, shocking for Isaiah to have to dictate this message because it wasn't at all what they expected.

They were the promised people of God. They were in the land flowing with milk and honey. They wanted God to destroy their oppressors and their those who came against them and that isn't the message we have here.

[ 17 : 56 ] God's saying, listen, it's not all about Jerusalem. It's not all about Israel. It's not all about Judah. God's brutal enemies are engulfed into God's gracious loving purpose.

And I hope we'll see that that's significant. There's a genius there. There's a great genius there of God's mission for us. And we're reminded of it, obviously, in fulfillment when Jesus comes and Jesus launches himself into enemy territory, into a world that doesn't know him and love him, indeed rejects him.

Actually, where does he end up going? Egypt. That's where he ends up going. We're going to come to the Nativity story before too long. And out of Egypt, God called his son.

He goes down to Egypt, but that's besides the point. But he comes back and he lives among a people who reject him. We read that in Luke's Gospel. The people rejected him. A prophet was without honor in his own home.

And he goes to the cross. And in the cross, where's he going? In the cross, he's going to the pit of hell. He's going to judgment himself. And he's going into enemy territory to redeem his people, to bring us back.

[ 19 : 18 ] And that is really what God is speaking about here in this great prophecy. He goes on in verses 16 to 25, and we don't really have time to look at it in any detail at all.

But we see a people, and there's things I don't understand in timing, and God's outworking of that that aren't revealed, and I certainly don't understand. But in principle form, what we see here is that this people come to recognize God's hand in their lives.

Verse 16 speaks about that. There's a fear because they recognize that there is a God. And verse 20 tells us that they cry out for rescue.

We assign a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt when they cry to the Lord because of their oppressors. He will send them a Savior and a Deliverer. So we see this people who are anti-God and opposed to God and living without reference to God.

And there's a great change in their lives to the point where they see their need of a Redeemer. And they cry out to the living God who they know of from Judah and who they know of from Israel.

[ 20 : 27 ] And they cry out to Him, and God, we're told, sends them a Savior and a Defender. Hmm. I wonder who that could be.

Isaiah is full of references. This Old Testament prophecy, full of references to the coming of Jesus. Which one did I learn in Sunday school here in this very building?

And I had to come up every week with the verse Isaiah 53. I learned that from beginning to end as part of our Sunday school class, which speaks of the great suffering servant.

And there are so many references in Isaiah, this great prophet to Jesus, to this Savior, to this Redeemer, to this Defender who will come, who makes God known. How does he make God known?

Because he is God. He's God in the flesh. That's who we have in Jesus. He's God's great prophet a million times over, isn't he? Because he is God.

[ 21 : 36 ] He doesn't just bring a message from God. He is God. He doesn't just speak about God. He speaks as God. The great prophet. And he brings not only God's message, but God's redemption.

But do you know how he brings God's redemption? By becoming judged by God. He doesn't come with a message of judgment. He takes God's judgment as his beloved Son.

And I've used this illustration before and it's the best illustration I can think of. Is that he takes the punch himself, like the great boxer, that assumes and takes and absorbs the great punching and still stands.

And he's the one who takes God's judgment against our sin. The judgment of living without God and rebelling against God and thinking we don't need God and sinning against God.

He takes the judgment and he offers hope and salvation. That's what's beginning to be unveiled here as they cry out for a Redeemer.

[ 22 : 50 ] And they go on to be a people who worship and offer sacrifice to the living God as it's revealed here in this Old Testament language. They worship Him.

Now it's kind of interesting if you look deeply into this or think a little bit. It's very similar to the language of the Jews being brought out of Egypt.

It's kind of Exodus language. There's oppression, there's plagues, there's rescue and there's worship. And it's like God's reversing the whole thing and making it happen this time to the Egyptians. Not only has God brought his people out of Egypt and redeemed them in the Old Testament pointing forward to ours, but he's now also redeeming the people of Israel.

And that means that this speaks of, and I want to finish with a couple of things. First finish with this last verse. It's the most remarkable verse because it speaks of the worldwide influence of the Gospel.

So that we don't follow a parochial God, we don't follow a Middle Eastern God, we don't follow a Jewish God, we don't follow a kind of cultic God of some people and not others.

[ 24 : 02 ] But what we have here is the mission of God being revealed as represented by Egypt and Assyria, speaking of them as representing the Gentile world, the whole of the known world as it were, almost at the time.

And we have that great amazing verse. In that day Israel will be third. That must have been hard for Isaiah to think about. A third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying blessed, this is the great covenantal language of the Old Testament people, of God's people, being applied to Gentiles, not just Gentiles, being applied to the sworn enemies, the brutal, vicious sworn enemies of God at the time.

Blessed be Egypt, my people, and Assyria, the work of my hands, or my Assyria, the work of my hands, and Israel, my inheritance, or my Israel, and my inheritance.

So you've got that amazing reality that God intends to bless not just Israel, not just the Jewish people, as they thought at that time, but even in the midst of the Old Testament, there's this pointing forward to God's salvation affecting and influencing the whole of the world.

And not only the whole of the world, but God's deepest enemies being transformed into his friends.

So if I was to give a theme to this whole passage about the prophecy of God in the midst of prophecy, it would be God's purpose to make his enemies his friends, which is what we see in the work of Jesus Christ, that he makes his enemies his friends.

[ 25 : 48 ] Now can I just apply that very briefly for five minutes before we finish? Because we must take this truth and pass it and bring it forward into the New Testament. We must bring it forward to Jesus Christ, the ongoing revelation of God, and remember ourselves.

That unfolding with him. So what did Jesus come to do? He came to turn his enemies into his friends. You were an enemy, I was an enemy without grace, opposed to God.

I felt opposed to God, but my nature and my attitudes and my desires were that I can go things on my own. I don't need God. And there was sinful self-centred lustful greed-filled motivations.

That applies to us all. And that Jesus has come to turn his enemies into friends. And give one example of that simply, apart from your own life and my own life as Christians.

One example from the New Testament is Saul of Tarsus. He was a great kind of type of what God has come to do. It's similar to Egypt. The most unexpected person, or the most unexpected nation was Egypt.

[ 26 : 59 ] The most unexpected person was Saul. Saul who was breathing out blasphemy against Jesus, whose aim in life as a religious upright good guy was to destroy the Christian faith, was to kill the Christian faith, to nail it.

To do what Herod had failed to do and nail the followers, or in Herod's case, nail the author, Jesus, the baby. And yet Saul is provoked by Jesus, is goaded by Jesus, is given others as a witness.

Stephen, the great martyr, by Jesus. And Saul comes to that place where he is powerfully redeemed and turned round on the road to Damascus by Jesus. When he sees that actually he's, rather than doing what he thinks was good, he was doing what was evil and destructive. And his eyes are opened and he's turned round. Now the challenges for us are twofold there, I think.

One is that within this story, and within Saul's story, and within our story, there must be the centrality of repentance, of turning towards God, and of recognizing that without God we're alienated, we're separate, we're enemies, we're against God, we're not going his way, because self-reliance will have us think that we don't need God.

[ 28 : 34 ] And as Christians, we can go for a long time in our lives without daily repentance, without daily asking for God to take out from our lives the things that separate us from Him.

We need God, we need Christ every moment, every day, to rejoice in His grace and His goodness and His love, and in His belonging, and in His inheritance that He gives us, and in His future for us. Sometimes rubbish things happen in our lives. Sometimes rubbish things keep happening in our lives. Sometimes we see our friends, our neighbors, or others, and things are terrible in their lives. And we say, well, what are you playing at, God? I thought you loved people. And surely part of it must be that we must say, sometimes God will accelerate these things to bring us to our knees, and we need Him. It's the action of someone who knows us better than we know ourselves, and who knows that sometimes with everything he's playing, sailing, there's no time for him, no time for his grace and for his love.

But like the prodigal son story, you know, brought him to that point where he saw his need. But it's also an encouragement, a challenge, I think, for us to pray for our friends, to keep on doing that this week, praying for our friends, longing for our friends to become Christians.

[ 30 : 08 ] And maybe sometimes we look at them and think they seem so far away. It seems like as time goes on, they seem further away from grace. They seem more atheistic, they seem more distant and more disinterested.

And we're frustrated by that and discouraged. And we think God isn't listening. Can I encourage you to keep praying? Because that's who God came for. These are the people God came for.

That's who he wants in the kingdom. And we will rejoice when we see that happening. So we see the mission of prophecy through Christ as he reveals salvation and as he reveals the significance of salvation, not just for us, but also that there's a cosmic international.

There will be a day when all who repent are part of nations that belong to God.

And there will be a worldwide redemption, cosmic redemption. And those who don't know Christ will be outside of that.

[ 31 : 22 ] But very briefly in conclusion, what's the mission of prophecy through us? What prophetic role do we play if we play part of this? Do we have a message? Do we have a mission?

Do we make big banners and go out the street with them? With God's prophetic message? Do we have sandwich boards that we go down Prince's street with, saying repent for the day of judgment is coming?

Do we look for a platform in the media or in politics to declare this message? You may do all of these things. Feel free. I'm not going to. But feel free.

But primarily, I think our job as prophets in the kingdom is to live as light. To live in the light of Jesus Christ, recognizing we were enemies with the humble, repentant heart that that gives us.

But being prophetic with courage and with dignity and with consistency so that when people ask, we have something to say.

[ 32 : 32 ] We have something to say. And I think by loving our enemies. That's how we fulfill our prophetic role. Because this prophetic role speaks about a God who makes his enemies his friends.

And I think that is the most powerful outworking of what we must do to be Christ-like and to be part of God's mission.

You have heard it said, you shall love your enemy. It's all you love your neighbour and hate your enemy. Jesus says, but I say to you, love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you.

So you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his son rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you?

Do not even the tax collectors do the same. And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same. You therefore must be perfect. So your heavenly Father is perfect. Love your enemies. Do good to them.

[ 33 : 40 ] We spitefully use you. That is part of our great prophetic role. In the everyday rubbing of shoulders of people that we are around. And may we see God's work more clearly. Sometimes it's very heart-sy, isn't it?

It just seems chaotic, sometimes in our own lives as well. May we ask God to reveal his work in our own hearts. And even in the chaos of the darkness that we're going through, maybe in our personal lives, and you may be going through great darkness at the moment.

May his grace enable you to see that it's not random and he doesn't hate you. He loves you. And he has a purpose sometimes that we don't understand.

But his mission is to make his enemies his friends. Amen. Let's pray briefly. Father God, help us to understand who you are and understand why you've come.

We don't in any way pretend to have all the answers. We know that you didn't give your own people all the answers. We know that you asked them to live by faith and to trust in what you did promise and what you did say you were doing.

[ 34 : 55 ] And we long to see even the true and completed outworking of the prophecies in Isaiah. And we long to see nations and individuals who are currently against you, turning towards you and to see righteousness with Christ's Lordship.

A love for God and a love for one another being the great agenda of our nations and our peoples. But maybe not distance the personal nature of our walk with you.

Maybe not damn you or condemn you for your perceived understanding of your action or inaction. But maybe live by faith and look at everything through the prism of Jesus and the cross and his commitment and his sacrifice and his determination to redeem us from death and from separation and from division and from hatred and from loss to bring us to life and life in fullness.

We ask that we would see that clearly. Forgive us when we don't. For Jesus' sake. Amen.