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“Preach the Word” in the Old Testament

Walter A. Maier III

The motto of Concordia Theological Seminary — κήρυσον τὸν λόγον — is taken from the New Testament (2 Timothy 4:2). This article will review selected Old Testament passages that are related to this motto. These passages shed light on the task of preaching the word, thus giving guidance today to ministers of that word.

Paul’s exhortation starts with the imperative “preach.” Old Testament counterparts are imperatives uttered by David on the occasion of the ark of the covenant being brought into Jerusalem. These words are recorded in 1 Chronicles 16:8-36. Parts of Psalms 96, 105, and 106 duplicate this portion of Chronicles.

In verse 8 of 1 Chronicles 16 David says, “Give thanks to Yahweh, call on His name, make known among the peoples His deeds.” The last phrase, “make known [verbal root נִדַּב in the *hiphil*] among the peoples His deeds,” is an encouragement in part to proclaim, or preach, and not only among one people, the Israelites, but all over the earth, among the peoples. For two parallels of this phrase, in Psalm 105:1 [LXX 104] and Isaiah 12:4, the Septuagint renders the Hebrew verb with ἀναγγείλατε, from the root ἀναγγέλλω. This Greek verbal root in the New Testament can mean, according to context, “proclaim,” “announce,” “report,” or “preach.”

1 Chronicles 16:23 repeats this same theme: “Proclaim the good news of His salvation from day to day.” The Hebrew verbal root rendered “proclaim” (the good news of), נִדַּב, could also be translated here “preach.” That verb נִדַּב, in the parallel verse of Psalm 96, is represented in the Septuagint with the Greek verb εὐαγγελίζω, used so frequently in the New Testament in contexts of proclaiming, or preaching, the gospel.

Verse 24 of 1 Chronicles 16 continues the proclamation theme: “declare [verbal root נִפְרַץ] among the nations His glory, among all the peoples His wonderful acts.” For the parallel verse in Psalm 96 the Septuagint translates the Hebrew verb with the Greek verbal root already noted, ἀναγγέλλω. Again David urges that preaching, certainly included in his directive to “declare,” be carried out not only in Israel, but in all the nations.

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David, in Psalm 9:11 [Hebrews, verse 12] writes, "Sing praises to Yahweh, who dwells in Zion, proclaim among the peoples His deeds." The root of the Hebrew verb translated as "proclaim" this time is נָגַד . The Septuagint renders נָגַד , of Psalm 9:11, also with the verbal root $\alpha\nu\alpha\gamma\gamma\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\lambda\omega$.

Thus three Hebrew verbs — שָׁר , פָּרַס , and נָגַד — have semantic overlap. In the passages cited, these three, together with the closely related Hebrew verb עָדַד in the *hiphil* stem, in part denote preaching. As imperatives they are equivalents, so to speak, to the Greek $\kappa\acute{\eta}\rho\upsilon\sigma\iota\nu$, "preach."

The full motto of the seminary, however, is $\kappa\acute{\eta}\rho\upsilon\sigma\iota\nu\ \tau\acute{o}\nu\ \lambda\acute{o}\gamma\omicron\nu$, "preach the word." While the Old Testament passages cited are not exact parallels (none have דְּבָר , "the word"), they say essentially the same thing as the 2 Timothy passage. Instead of "the word," the objects of the Hebrew imperatives "make known," "proclaim," and "declare" are: Yahweh's deeds, His salvation, His glory, and His wonderful acts. All four are components of one reality, of one truth. Yahweh's deeds are wonderful acts; certain of His deeds result in salvation; and His acts, some of which bring about salvation, reveal Yahweh's glory, which may be defined as the sum total of God's attributes as they shine forth for people to behold, or any number of them as people perceive them. Yahweh's attributes are seen in how He acts, in what His deeds accomplish.

The contexts where we have observed the phrases "His [Yahweh's] deeds," "His salvation," "His glory," and "His wonderful acts" determine what the phrases signify. These contexts are, again, Psalm 9; Psalms 96, 105, and 106, portions of which comprise the whole psalm of David in 1 Chronicles 16 (8-36); and Isaiah 12. In Psalm 9, the deeds of Yahweh include His having rebuked the wicked (5) and dealt in righteousness with David's enemies (3-4); Yahweh's being a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble (9); His reigning forever (7), which means that Yahweh in the future will judge the world in righteousness, and govern the peoples with justice (8). As a result, David will be glad and rejoice in Yahweh (2).

In Psalm 96, David, speaking about Yahweh's salvation and wonderful acts, confesses that "Yahweh reigns [10]," and He will judge the peoples with equity and the world in righteousness (10, 13). Therefore, let the heavens rejoice, and the earth be glad (11).

In Psalm 105 David reviews the history of Israel from Abraham until the entrance into Canaan under Joshua. God showed Israel tremendous

mercy and favor, preserving the family of Jacob from starvation through His servant Joseph, and later delivering Israel from Egyptian bondage, providing for the nation in the wilderness, and leading Israel to the Promised Land. Thus, David writes, "Give thanks to Yahweh . . . make known among the peoples His deeds . . . tell of all His wonderful acts . . . let the hearts of those who seek Yahweh rejoice" (1-3).

In the psalm David gives the reason why God showed such grace to Israel: because of His covenant with Abraham, which was renewed with Isaac and Jacob (8-10). The Abrahamic covenant not only included the promise that Abraham's descendants would inherit Canaan (emphasized in Psalm 105), but also that in Abraham (and Isaac and Jacob) all the peoples of the earth would be blessed. This latter promise, of course, is connected with Genesis 3:15, where God first announces the coming Savior. God decided that the Messiah, according to His human nature, would descend from Abraham and his family, later known as Israel. Thus David, in verse 6 of Psalm 105, refers to the descendants of Abraham, the sons of Jacob, as Yahweh's "chosen ones." God showed wonderful favor to Israel, showering the nation with blessings, because from Israel would come the Savior. Yahweh was a gracious God, displaying undeserved kindness to sinful people.

Psalm 106 emphasizes that the Israelites were sinners. David reviews, in a negative light, the history of the nation from the sojourn in Egypt through the period of the judges. Despite all of Yahweh's acts of mercy and favor, the Israelites repeatedly forgot what Yahweh had done for them, rebelled against the Lord, and were spiritually unfaithful. As a result, Yahweh inflicted various punishments on the people. Yet David, toward the end of the Psalm, after describing God in His anger handing over wicked Israelites to their enemies during the period of the judges, states, "But He [Yahweh] saw their distress when He heard their cry; for their sake He remembered His covenant and according to the abundance of His grace He relented" (44-45). After reviewing the sins of His ancestors, and having confessed concerning himself and his contemporaries, "We have sinned, along with our fathers" (6), David prays, "Save us, Yahweh our God" (47).

When Isaiah in chapter 12 of his book writes, "Make known among the peoples His [Yahweh's] deeds" (4), the preceding verses of the chapter shed light on what those deeds are. Isaiah instructs the believers of his day, and of all future centuries, to say, "I will praise you, Yahweh.

Though You were angry with me, Your anger has turned away and You have comforted me. Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid" (1-2). The salvation Isaiah refers to is much more than mere physical deliverance from human enemies; the emphasis here is on spiritual salvation. Chapter 12 closes the first section of the book, which has Isaiah's portrayal in vivid terms of the sins of Israel, but also the powerful Messianic prophecies of chapters 7, 9, and 11. Throughout his book Isaiah announces this salvation in the coming Savior; for example, chapter 40, and the Servant Songs (which climax in the fourth, chapter 52:13-53:12).

In review, the verses examined in the first part of this article speak about proclaiming or making known, which in part implies preaching. That which is to be preached – Yahweh's deeds, His salvation, His glory, His wonderful acts – can be summarized in two words, law and gospel. Those two words summarize the entire Old Testament. This two-part message involved historical reality: the reality of Yahweh, the one true God, who is holy and righteous, but also gracious, merciful, and loving; the reality of sinful humanity, unable to save itself, and experiencing judgments of God; the reality of salvation by God's grace, because of the coming Messiah, and the blessedness of being in fellowship with Yahweh. For the believing Israelite this law-gospel message was rooted in and exemplified by the past; it had meaning for the present; and it dealt with the future, with Yahweh's sending the Messiah and judging the peoples.

This law-gospel message, namely, Yahweh's wonderful acts, which revealed His glory (His attributes), some of which resulted in negative judgment, some in salvation, was recorded in Scripture, the word of God. For the believing Israelite that meant the Torah of Moses and any other portion of the Old Testament that had been completed by the believer's lifetime. Thus one can see the verses cited in 1 Chronicles 16, the Psalms, and Isaiah as counterparts to 2 Timothy 4:2, "Preach the word."

Verses 9 and 10 (Hebrew 10 and 11) of Psalm 40 indicate, at least in part, proclamation, or preaching, of the word by David. He writes, "I proclaim [verbal root קָשַׁר] righteousness in the great assembly . . . I speak of Your faithfulness and salvation. I do not conceal Your grace and truth from the great assembly." The term "great assembly" probably refers to

those who congregated in Jerusalem for public worship.¹ David delivered a law-gospel message to this assembly. The terms “faithfulness,” “salvation,” and “grace” denote a gospel message. Concerning the word “righteousness” in verse 9, H. C. Leupold explains: “. . . God’s righteousness is that marvelous attribute of His which leads Him both to deal graciously with those who faithfully serve Him and seek His countenance as well as to punish the evildoer.”² Franz Delitzsch comments concerning these verses, “He [David] has proclaimed to all Israel the evangel of Jahve’s justifying and gracious rule, which only changes into retribution towards those who despise His love . . .”³

Various Old Testament verses depict the efficaciousness of this proclaimed word. For example, God tells the prophet Jeremiah with regard to the wicked of Judah, that because of their speaking untrue words, “I am making My words in your mouth a fire, and this people wood, and it will consume them” (5:14). Speaking in general about the power of His word that He revealed to His spokesmen, the prophets, God asks Jeremiah this rhetorical question: “Is not My word like fire . . . and like a hammer that shatters a crag?” (23:29) Joel Drinkard correctly observes that these similes portray the power of God’s word. He writes:

Fire bears the image of destruction, but also of refining. Likewise, the hammer may shatter, break in pieces, or may be used to cut that which is being forged, therefore being sharp, incisive. The hammer may also be used in refining to beat out the base material. Alternatively, hammer may refer to the stone-mason’s craft and depict the cutting of blocks, or the final shaping of blocks.⁴

¹See Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, translated by Keith Crim (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1986), 67-70; H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1959), 326; and Willem A. VanGemeren, “Psalms,” in volume 5 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 321. Peter C. Craigie, in his *Psalms 1-50*, thinks the term “great congregation/assembly” could refer to the people of the entire nation of Israel (volume 19 of *Word Biblical Commentary* [Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1983], 315 and 317).

²Leupold, *Psalms*, 326.

³Franz Delitzsch, *Psalms*, translated by Francis Bolton, volume V of *Commentary on the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, n. d.; original date 1871), 41.

⁴Peter C. Craigie, Page H. Kelley, and Joel F. Drinkard, Jr., *Jeremiah 1-25*, volume 26 of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1991), 350.

Drinkard concludes: "Both images (fire and hammer) show the relationship between destruction and refining . . . While Yahweh's word does refine, it burns away the straw, it shatters and removes the common rock while leaving the ore, it cuts and shapes the stone into a useful architectural unit."⁵

Carl Keil sees the image of a hammer smashing rock as illustrating "the power of God, which overcomes all that is earthly, even what is firmest and hardest," and cites Hebrews 4:12 as a comparison verse: ". . . the Word of God . . . sharper than any double-edged sword . . . piercing even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow . . ."⁶

The well-known Old Testament passage concerning the efficaciousness of the proclaimed word of God is Isaiah 55:10-11. Verses 8 and 9 also will be included:

"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways," declares Yahweh. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there without watering the earth and making it bring forth and sprout, so that it gives seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so will be My word that goes out from My mouth: It will not return to Me empty, but will accomplish that which I desire and be successful in that for which I sent it."

This word from Yahweh's mouth is that which was proclaimed by the prophets and written down by them. They received the word directly from Yahweh's mouth. Other preachers had it mediately, from the prophetic Scripture (the Old Testament), but what they declared still was the word from Yahweh's mouth.

As the divine word, it produces the results God wants, His purposes, as did God's word at creation, as recorded in Genesis 1. This word is effective, dynamic, "alive with . . . [God's] power," to use the phrase of August Pieper.⁷ As God performs His will in the rain and snow, so He

⁵Craigie, Kelley, and Drinkard, *Jeremiah*, 350.

⁶Carl F. Keil, *Jeremiah. Lamentations*, translated by David Patrick and James Kennedy, volume VII of *Commentary on the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, no date; original date 1880), 364.

⁷August Pieper, *Isaiah II*, translated by Erwin E. Kowalke (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1979), 489.

does, too, in His word. Edward Young comments, “If in matters so transitory [for example, the rain and snow] God’s power is efficacious, what will it not be with respect to the word that proceeds from His mouth?”⁸

The context of Isaiah 55 emphasizes God’s word as creative and enabling, watering the soil of the human heart, softening it, and rendering it productive. In literal terms, the word leads sinners to repentance, faith, and the blessings of salvation, including everlasting life, and empowers them for godly living. Alec Motyer points out:

On the one hand, repentance is the way to enter the great, free feast [described in Isaiah 55]; on the other hand, the call to repent [contained in Isaiah 55] is a word of God bringing with it its own power of accomplishment. As the rain furnishes both seed and bread, so the word of God plants the seed of repentance in the heart and feeds the returning sinner with the blessed consequences repentance produces.⁹

A related observation comes from Martin Luther:

This . . . [passage in Isaiah 55] is spoken in part . . . for the consolation of the weak. For consolation, because the Word seems so weak and foolish that there appears to be no strength in it. How can it be believed that all the power, victory, and triumph of God are in the word of a feeble human mouth? . . . It is therefore a consolation for the purpose of lifting up the weak, lest they be offended at the lowliness of God, who has every victory in His Word. . . . So our building and promotion of the church is not the result of our works but of the Word of God which we preach, . . . Here you see that everything is produced by the Word.¹⁰

While Isaiah 55 deals mainly with the repentance of sinners, the verses quoted from this chapter are not limited in their meaning to that particular subject. Though verses 8 and 9, concerning God’s thoughts and

⁸Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, volume 3 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1972), 383.

⁹J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 458.

¹⁰*Luther’s Works*, American Edition, 55 volumes, edited by J. Pelikan and H. T. Lehmann (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House and Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1955-1986), 17:257-258.

ways not being our thoughts and ways, refer in the context of chapter 55 to God's plan of salvation by grace and not human effort, what these verses teach holds true for other thoughts and ways of God. Likewise, though verses 10 and 11, speaking of the effectiveness of God's word, emphasize salutary results, the full meaning of these verses does not exclude the judicial. As Young explains: "In this particular context the element of blessing seems to predominate . . . but the thought is not thus limited. Just as the word is efficacious for the salvation of believers, so also is it abundantly efficacious for condemning the wicked [for instance, those who are not brought to faith]."¹¹ Young cites Christ's words in John 12:48: "The one who rejects Me and does not receive My words has a judge; that word which I spoke will judge him at the last day." Isaiah 6 also shows the judicial effects of the word, where God, according to His secondary will with regard to the unrepentant, commands Isaiah through the preaching of God's word to "make fat [unreceptive] the heart of this people; make their ears heavy [unresponsive] and blind their eyes" (10).

Preaching the efficacious word, though, involves more than simply reading it out loud. Preaching means using a text from Scripture and explaining, expounding, interpreting, and applying it for the hearers. The phrases examined earlier — "make known among the peoples Yahweh's deeds," "proclaim His salvation from day to day," "declare among the nations His glory, among all the peoples His wonderful acts" — imply an exposition of Scripture. Even the prophets, it can be assumed, who proclaimed the word recorded in their books, would also at times add explanations for the hearers which are not included in their writings.¹²

Leviticus 10:9 and 11 bring out the importance and necessity of not only reading God's word to the people but also properly interpreting Scripture. In this verse God spells out one of the main duties of the priests. There were provisions for the priests to read the Torah publicly to the people (Deuteronomy 31:11), but here God says to Aaron, "You and your sons . . . must *teach* [verbal root יָרָה] the Israelites all the decrees

¹¹Young, *Book of Isaiah*, 384.

¹²One may also see J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), who holds, concerning the prophetic speeches, that "we have frequently only brief accounts or summaries . . ." (154; see also 159). Lindblom also refers to the "disciples" ("taught ones") in Isaiah 8:16, and thinks this is evidence that there were, generally speaking, disciples of the prophets (162). He writes: "The occupation of the disciples consisted in the first place in receiving instruction from their prophetic leaders concerning the religious and moral principles of their preaching" (162).

which Yahweh spoke to them through Moses.” The priests were to help the people understand and learn the Torah. Similarly, Moses says concerning the members of the tribe of Levi in Deuteronomy 33:10, “They shall teach [verbal root יָדַע] Your precepts to Jacob, and Your Torah to Israel.” Moreover, this teaching activity may have included the priests preaching to the people, both at the tabernacle or temple and in the towns of Israel. 2 Chronicles 17:7-9 reports how priests and Levites sent by King Jehoshaphat “taught [verbal root לָמַד] in Judah, having with them the Book of the law of Yahweh; they went about in all the towns of Judah and taught among the people.” This writer agrees with the opinion of Joyce Baldwin, who thinks that these priests and Levites “fulfilled an itinerant preaching programme . . .”¹³

Toward the end of Old Testament history God, through His prophet Malachi, describes the kind of godly priest who existed previously in Israel, and who was a contrast to the wicked priests of Malachi’s day. God says, “True instruction” – whether instructing an individual or many people – “was in his mouth and no wrong was found on his lips” (2:6). This meant the priest knew the word and expounded it correctly and appropriately for the people as their teacher and/or preacher. The Malachi passage continues: “For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge [this implies studying], and from his mouth men should seek instruction - because he is the messenger of Yahweh Sabaoth” (2:7). Both priests and prophets, who spoke God’s word to the people and interpreted it, were messengers of Yahweh. However, the prophets were special, extraordinary spokesmen of Yahweh; the priests were ordinary messengers.

Proclamation of God’s word, then, can take place in a private or public setting, in a teaching or preaching format (and there is, of course, overlap). This proclamation involves using Scripture and having proper interpretation and application of the biblical text. Nehemiah 8 reports an interesting example of public proclamation. In the day of Ezra and Nehemiah many of the people of Judah assembled at Jerusalem. From a high platform Ezra read aloud to them from the Book of the Torah. Verse 7 states that at the same time the Levites “helped the people to understand the Torah” while the people were standing there. As H. G. M. Williamson has explained, probably Ezra paused after a certain amount

¹³Joyce G. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, volume 24 of *The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1972), 236.

of reading, and the Levites moved among the people, explaining the word to them.¹⁴ Verse 8 goes on to say that the Levites were "giving the sense" to the people, so that they "understood the reading."

In summary, there are passages in the Old Testament equivalent to the New Testament's "Preach the word." What was to be preached, or proclaimed, was the word of God, law and gospel. This word showed people their sin, the way of salvation, and God's will for their lives. The word preached, God's word, was powerful, effective. Nevertheless, true proclamation involved more than simply reading or quoting from Scripture.

Appropriate at this point is a brief review of the blessed results of proper preaching of the word during the Old Testament history. We are all familiar with the stories of people who, because of their hearing proclamation, repent, confess their faith in Yahweh, and lead lives pleasing to the Lord. One representative passage is Joshua 24, which recounts how Joshua, in a covenant renewal ceremony after the conquest of Canaan, preaches to the Israelites who have assembled at Shechem. He urges them, "Now fear Yahweh and serve Him in integrity and truth," and the people respond, "We . . . will serve Yahweh, because He is our God" (14, 18). We think of the periods of such godly kings as David, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah, during whose reigns edifying declaration of the word was the norm. As a result, the majority of the people were faithful to Yahweh, and the nation experienced God's blessing. We think of God, through the preaching of the prophet Haggai in the post-exilic community, bringing those in Judah to repentance and the God-glorifying response of rebuilding the temple.

Nehemiah 8 relates how the people, because of the proclamation carried out by Ezra and the Levites (and Nehemiah, also), wept because of the law portions of the Torah, but rejoiced because of the gospel sections. Malachi 2 says that the God-fearing priest, who was Yahweh's faithful messenger, "turned many from iniquity" (6). The Lord used the proper handling of the word by godly priests to change people in such a blessed way.¹⁵

¹⁴H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, volume 16 of Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1985), 290.

¹⁵One may also see the opposite picture in Micah 3:11-12.

Another result of preaching the word was that the true preacher at times had the love and respect of those who heard him and benefited from his proclamation. This is strongly implied in the description of the godly priest in Malachi 2:4-7. Verse 9 presents the opposite situation: the corrupt priests of Malachi’s day, who with their corrupt handling of the Torah caused many to stumble, being despised and humiliated by all the people.

The language of Isaiah 52:7 applies to preachers of the gospel: “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who proclaims peace, who brings good news of happiness, who proclaims salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’” The Hebrew verbal root שָׁרַח occurs twice in this verse, and the phrase “Your God reigns!” echoes Psalm 96:10, “Say among the nations, ‘Yahweh reigns.’” Isaiah employs the imagery of a messenger in the ancient Near East running and bringing good tidings to a community. Crossing mountains, he finally enters the village and delivers the news to the people who have been waiting for him. Delighted, overjoyed with his message, they have sincere gratitude for the messenger, viewing even his dirty, dusty feet as beautiful. No doubt many gospel preachers during the Old Testament era had the great appreciation of those who were spiritually refreshed and encouraged through their proclamation.

Again, these sample passages report or indicate blessed results of proclamation of the word, and of a happy relationship between the preacher and those hearing him. But what about those cases when the faithful declaration of God’s word had negative results and the godly messengers experienced persecution, which led some of them to complain to the Lord? One recalls especially certain chapters in the lives of Elijah and Jeremiah. 1 Kings 19 relates that Elijah, threatened by Jezebel with death, runs for his life, and prays, “It is enough! Now, Yahweh, take my life, because I am no better than my ancestors” (4). Later, on Mount Sinai, he complains to the Lord, “I have been very zealous for Yahweh, God of Hosts. For the Israelites have abandoned Your covenant, broken down Your altars, and put Your prophets to death with the sword, and I, I alone, am left, and they seek my life, to take it” (14).

In chapter 20 of his book, verses 7-18, Jeremiah records a most bitter complaint to Yahweh due to the miseries, opposition, and ridicule he encountered as His messenger. Theodore Laetsch describes the angry,

despondent prophet: ". . . he breaks down completely. . . . His office appeared to him as an intolerable burden. . . . He is disgusted with his office, dissatisfied with his God, who had called him into this office. He charges God with having deceived him."¹⁶ Concerning verses 14-18, when Jeremiah curses the day of his birth and wishes that he had been aborted, Laetsch writes: "Jeremiah breaks forth in one of the most violent outbursts of dissatisfaction and denunciation of the ways of the Lord ever uttered by human tongue."¹⁷

The following are four observations about the situations of these prophets. First, both men, despite their bitterness, still communicated with the Lord in prayer. Though at a spiritual lowpoint, they have not cut themselves off completely from Yahweh.

Second, the reason for their complaining was that they were disappointed and angry with the results of their proclaiming the word of God. Their countrymen did not repent *en masse* and return to Yahweh in genuine faith. The reality was the opposite of what they had hoped and worked for: their countrymen kept on violating the covenant and persecuting or killing God's prophets. Elijah and Jeremiah themselves had to endure fierce hostility and opposition. What had been the point of their ministry? Why should they continue to preach the word?

Third, both men were wrong to complain. Laetsch comments with regard to Jeremiah:

Forgotten was that great honor bestowed upon him to be an ambassador of the Most High, a spokesman of the Lord of Lords. . . . Forgotten was God's word that He [sic] was also called to build and to plant (ch. 1: 10) . . . [his charge that God deceived him] is without foundation, for God had very definitely foretold trials against which it would be necessary to stand like an iron pillar . . . and had promised to be with him.¹⁸

As Laetsch points out, it was Jeremiah's sinful flesh speaking here.¹⁹

Elijah, too, complained because he was not fully trusting in the Lord. Simon DeVries explains that

¹⁶Theodore Laetsch, *Jeremiah* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1952), 176.

¹⁷Laetsch, *Jeremiah*, 178.

¹⁸Laetsch, *Jeremiah*, 176.

¹⁹Laetsch, *Jeremiah*, 176.

there can be little doubt but that the Elijah of our narrative is so weak and filled with despair because he has suddenly cut himself off [that is, distanced himself] from the fountain of his strength, the God of Israel, who is also the God of heaven and earth. All that he can remember that is positive is his own prophetic authority and authenticity: “I have been furiously zealous for Yahweh, God of Hosts.” Any prophet who sees things going badly in his ministry and as a result wants to abandon it and perhaps surrender his very life must assuredly have forgotten from whom his real strength comes.²⁰

But these prophets were wrong to complain also because they were judging the results of their preaching according to their viewpoint, plans, purposes, wishes. They simply had the wrong evaluation of their ministry. God undoubtedly startled Elijah with His response to the prophet: “Yet I cause to remain seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him” (18). The Book of Jeremiah, and other Old Testament literature, give evidence that there was similarly a faithful minority in Judah during the time of Jeremiah’s prophetic activity. Both men may have been blind to, or they overlooked, the facts, but their proclamation had positive results. God used their preaching for the benefit of a remnant of believing Israelites. Their number did not match that of the prophets’ hopes, but it corresponded exactly to God’s plan.

As discussed above, in Isaiah 55:8-9 God says that His thoughts are not our thoughts, and His ways are higher than our ways. God promises in Isaiah 55:11 that His word would accomplish what *He* desires and achieve the purpose for which *He* sent it. God’s purpose may not be identical to that of His messengers, and vice versa. Elijah and Jeremiah had one definition of success, God another. God evaluated their ministries as successful, because *His* goals were met. Luther has this pertinent observation with regard to Isaiah 55:11: “Therefore He [God] consoles us that although our word is persecuted and resisted, it will nevertheless achieve results, because it is the word of the mouth of God. . . . Thus you see here how He speaks against the offense that causes

²⁰Simon J. DeVries, *1 Kings*, volume 12 of Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1985), 236-237.

us to fear that the word of God will be without fruit, as seems to be the case."²¹

This understanding of God's purposes helps us to have a proper perspective concerning the proclamation of the word and Old Testament history. Despite the ministry of prophets and other preachers the Northern Kingdom and Judah proved to be unfaithful to Yahweh, with the result that the Northern Kingdom came to an end, and Judah continued in a much-reduced condition after the exile. One could judge the proclamation of the word a failure, yet that judgment would be incorrect.

Concerning the New Testament era, Scripture informs us that, despite the preaching of the word, in the future the church will decrease in size, undergo severe persecution, and be hammered down by the unbelieving world. Nevertheless, one should not consider the declaration of God's word during the New Testament period as, ultimately, unsuccessful. For God has used, from the beginning of world history, and He will use, to the end of world history, faithful proclamation to accomplish His will. God's blessing has attended and will attend all true messengers, from Enoch (Jude 14-15) and Noah (2 Peter 2:5) to those preaching when Christ returns on the Last Day.

The fourth observation is that God helped both Elijah and Jeremiah; He delivered them from their crises. Through the word God spoke to Elijah on Mount Sinai, and through the gospel that Jeremiah records in the middle of his complaint and elsewhere in his book, God renewed them spiritually, encouraged them, and empowered them for further service. Despite the fact that both men wanted to give up, God had more work for the prophets, which He enabled them to accomplish.

In conclusion, David's exhortation, "Proclaim Yahweh's deeds," remains relevant for us today. Our message is about Yahweh's deeds, and the Old Testament shows us why we are to deliver that message with joy and confidence. Therefore we heed these words of David, "Proclaim Yahweh's salvation from day to day"; or, "Declare among the nations His glory, among all the peoples His wonderful acts." Or, to put David's exhortation into New Testament terminology, κήρυξον τὸν λόγον, "Preach the word!"

²¹Luther's Works, 17:258.