

July 9, 2008

# DIVING DEEP

Dear friends, I apologize this is coming to you in an unusually plain format! Usually I prefer to dress up all my documents, but seeing as I am working on a laptop in an air conditioned bedroom (thus avoiding the stifling heat) this format will just have to do!

As we are working through our different genres of books of the Bible, please bear in mind that you should choose a book to work through on your own. I am always available for help if you need it!

## Prophecy

This is perhaps the most difficult part of Scripture for Christians to read, study, and understand. The symbolism, the poetry, and the historical references can make these books a real workout on the brain! But it is also within the prophetic books that we get the most intimate close encounter with knowing God...

And this is due completely to what a prophet was! A prophet was someone who was called or summoned by God to be His messenger to the chosen people. In fact, you will always find these two distinct markers of a prophet in the Bible: the story of their calling, and the message they were called to give to the people. Individuals could not decide to just become a prophet; in fact, the people were taught from the time of Moses to be wary of such people, because often times they were false prophets. (Deuteronomy 13 is an excellent explanation of false prophets and true prophets.) Not all of the Bible's prophets are strictly in the Prophetic books, but any prophet who did not specifically have a book named for them was known more as an active leader or initiator. Moses was one such person, and many more can be found in the historical books of the Old Testament. The prophets for whom there are books (our prophetic books) were guides and counselors, declaring God's Word, and reminding people of the Law of Moses.

Things to know about the prophetic books:

- These books ranged in date from mid-700's to mid-400's bce, during the most tumultuous time for God's chosen people. This is when they committed the most egregious sins, the most rebellious acts of disobedience, and when political strife and upheaval was at its height. Truly, if there was ever a time that God's forthright message was needed, it was during this time!
- Prophetic literature is full of strange—but repetitive—symbols and themes within the poetry. The images are bewildering, and confusing, and the use of numbers and symbols will not often times make sense to us as we read it. But they are not unimportant, as we will explore later.
- Prophetic literature is very historical. Unlike what you may be thinking about prophecy, most of it **is not**—I repeat, **is not**—about future-telling! Most of prophecy is about the current events at the time the message is given, or the events that are about to take place in the immediate future. Whatever future

messages there may be usually pertain to the coming of Jesus Christ—both the first time (in the gospels) and his return at the end of the age.

- There are two main types of poetic discourse that you will encounter in prophetic literature: the trial and the woe. In the trial discourse, the Lord will give evidence for the people being punished, and then He will exact judgment on them, exactly as a trial would play out. The woe discourse is an exclamation of the great sadness and mourning of the Lord—and the messengers—as they grieve over the rebelliousness of the people, followed by the reason for the mourning.
- Although I briefly explained the calling of a prophet, there is something else we must understand about the life of these prophets: their calling, their messages, and the reactions that they dealt with from the people were all very difficult burdens to bear. Theirs was a life of questioning, of sadness, of struggle, and it was not something one would have wanted for their lives. And yet, unlike other common people, the prophets had an intimate connection with God, and therefore had hope and joy beyond what you and I could ever imagine. The deeper their own valleys, the higher their mountaintops, and boy did they take in some amazing views from God's perspective!

How to study the prophetic books:

1. Because these are very historical, it is important to know what part of the biblical timeline they fit into, and what historical books you should read along with them as you study them. A good study Bible should have, in the introduction to the prophetic book, the corresponding historical texts to go along with it. If you do not have this, a quick search online or in a Bible study companion book will be able to tell you this. Read the historical book first, to get an overview, and then go through the prophetic book and refer back to the history when you need to.
2. Read the entire book all the way through once, and then approach it section by section and treat it as you did the historical narratives, summarizing the sections in your own words and picking out the main themes of the section.
3. Because much of prophecy is also poetry, treat it as you would also do the wisdom literature: try putting the poetic verse in your own words to get a deeper understanding of the emotions and experiences of the author.
4. Because these books are so focused on the individuals as prophets as well, do a character study. In each section, pull from it what you learn about the prophet as a person who is obedient to God's call. Also write about what you learn about God himself.
5. The symbols and numbers and images found in prophetic books are often times repeated throughout the Bible. Do a word study on some repeated images from the book you are studying to see where else they show up, and try to put together the meaning of that symbol given its use throughout the Bible. (we will look at word studies in a future lesson.)
6. When you have worked your way through the entire book, it is important to review Your themes, your summaries, and your word studies, and then re-read the book from beginning to end.