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DISCIPLESHIP TRACK, YEAR 3

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

GENESIS - MALACHI

The Major Prophets:

A survey of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel

by

The Men of Fireside

Spring 2026

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THE MAJOR PROPHETS

GOD'S PEOPLE PURSUING GOD'S PEOPLE

The first five books of the Bible are referred as the Pentateuch, which literally means “five books.” So far, we have gone through the first of book of the Pentateuch, Genesis. The next four books contained the law of God, and we saw how we are sanctified and holy, yet we are still sinners who need to offer sacrifice. Next, we are going to look at the prophets, the major ones. The prophets were sent from God to his people when they went astray. Rather than trust God, they began to put their hope and trust in other things. So, God sends a prophet, and the prophet’s job is to speak to the people on behalf of God. So, what did the prophets say to God’s people when they strayed?

We Should Know Better

Have you ever done something only to realize in hindsight that it was a bad idea? Just consider Germany’s defeat in The Great War I. Afterwards, the country was in ruins, the economy collapsed, and the government was weak and unstable. A defeated nation full of impoverished people were looking for a source of hope. Eventually, they elected a person, by democratic means, who promised them hope – Adolf Hitler. The next war with the world was so great that it was the new “greatest” war. The previous war was now called World War I” and the new war was called “World War II.” And by all measures, it was far worse than World War I. It was the German philosopher Georg Hegel that said, “We learn from history that we do not learn from history.” Hegel died

83 years before his nation proved his words prophetic.” They should have known better.

On a more personal level, have you ever trusted someone only to have them betray your trust? You put time and effort into a relationship, but they didn’t? You planned an event, and they were a no-show. Have you ever trusted in something, only to have your trust broken? Something you saved up for to buy, only to have it break. A stock you hoped would be a good return on investment, only to have it crash. There was something, or someone, that seemed so promising, and now there’s only loss, and disappointment. Why are we inclined to place our trust in people and things? We’ve done this before, and it didn’t work out. We try it again, and it fails again. If you’re anything like me, you have done this before. Why do we keep doing this? We should know better. Essentially, this is the message of the major prophets. This group consists of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel.

Problem: Not Trusting God

So, where did things go wrong? How did we end up in a place where God’s people have rejected the Maker and King of the universe and started trusting on other things and people? God’s people put their trust in the wrong things:

Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth! For the Lord has spoken: “I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner’s manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.” Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the Lord; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him (Isaiah 1:2-4).

The story of the major prophets is that God’s people have turned their backs on God by putting their trust in things other than God. Israel trusted in the protection that other nations promised them, they trusted in the promises of other kings, they trusted in their own unfaithful leaders, and they trusted in false gods.

Problem: Trusting other kings. When God’s people no longer trusted in him, they put their trust in other kings. When God brought the Assyrian army against Israel,

rather than turn to God and cry out for help, they turned to Pharaoh and Egypt's army.

Isaiah writes:

“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 (Isa 31:1)!

When Israel put their trust in an army, they thought they were safe. They thought the most powerful nation in the world, with all their chariots and horses, should have been enough to protect them. They were wrong. Because Israel trusted in armies rather than God, they were going to perish right along with the army they thought was going to protect them (Isa 31:3). Israel forgot that God delivered them from this same nation before during the Exodus from Egypt (Jud 6:8-10). They should have known better.

Problem: Trusting other gods. Not only did Israel turn their back on God by trusting other kings, but they also trusted other gods. Isaiah writes that the people are “full of superstitions” (Isa 2:6 NIV). Superstitions are characteristic of pagans, which is why Isaiah says those behaviors are from the East and are things that the Philistines do. Have you ever considered that superstitions are not simply things we do in hope that our circumstances go well. They are things we do because we don't trust in God.

Superstitions, and being superstitious, is idolatry. It is trusting in other gods. Professional athletes are a prime example today. They have all kinds up superstitions that they believe will help them get the outcome they want (i.e., winning they game). They have good luck charms, pre-game rituals, chants, or any number of things that they think having or doing will give them protection, wins, or whatever they want to happen in life. When it comes down to it, superstitions are gods that they trust more than God.

One of the clearest places in the prophets Israel's idolatry is found in Ezekiel 8:1-18. God took Ezekiel by the hair and carried him to the temple. God then allowed Ezekeil to see inside the temple where the priests were worshipping all sorts of idols,

and Israel thought that God couldn't see them (Eze 8:12). This provoked the jealousy of God, and finally the glory of the Lord departs from the temple and from Israel. These were the priest (Eze 7:26) and the elders (Eze 8:11), and women (Eze 8:14). While assuredly many people in the land who were idolaters, God shows the priests and the elders to Ezekeil. They should have known better.

Problem: Trusting unfaithful leaders. Godly leaders are good, and they are gifts from God (Eph 4:11-16). However, the leaders need accountability too because they are not perfect. In the context of a local church, when an elder teaches or lives in a manner that deviates from God's word – it is the church who is supposed to hold him accountable (1 Tim 5:19-20). In Israel, when a king deviates from God's word or his will – the people should have refused to follow their own king and trusted in God's word. But they didn't. They followed their leaders (Isa 3:1-3; 13-14). They should have known better.

Problem: Justice is coming. We all tend to like the idea of justice, and that is a good inclination. However, one of the reasons we tend to like justice is because we often see ourselves as the good guy; the one who upholds justice but not the one who is brought to justice. God's charge to his people is they have broken his law; they are lawless. They like to think about being a law-abiding citizen, while they break the law in their hearts and with their minds and hands. God speaks through Jeremiah and says:

Thus says the LORD: "What wrong did your fathers find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthlessness, and became worthless? ... Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the LORD, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water (Jer 2:5, 12-13).

God sent Jeremiah to prophecy about the message of God's coming justice – even to those who claimed to believe in God. In fact, God's promise of coming justice was especially against the people *because* they claimed to believe in him. Here lies a

critical observation if we are going to understand justice. The prophecy of Jeremiah is comprised of 52 chapters, and 45 focus on the sins of God's own people. So, should you spend most of your life focusing on the sins, failures, and problems of other people? Your siblings? Your friends? Unbelievers? Politicians? As believers, we are to focus first and foremost on our own sins, because we tend to think of ourselves as the good guy and the law-abiding citizen is simply because we focus on the faults and failures of others – and fail to see our own.

Solution: Confess, Repent, and Trust

We are not Israel, and we don't live in Jerusalem. Yet, we are the people of God. Our world and culture tempt us to trust in things that are not God and the pursue the idols of this world – to trust in the wrong thing. How do we get to the point where we not only know better, but we do better?

Solution: Listen to the prophets. Let's start by listening to God's prophets. Here's a helpful question to know if you listen to the prophets: have you read and meditated on the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel? The reason that God sent his prophets to his people is because he has compassion on his people, even when they are in sin (2 Chron 36:15). Are there seasons in your life where you have struggled with sin? Do you desire to feel the compassion of God during those seasons? The major prophets can help.

Solution: When suffering, confess your sin. It is important to note that our suffering doesn't always come from sin. But sometimes it does. When the armies that were prophesied to conquer Israel because of her sin finally showed up, God's people were smashed. Israel was feeling lonely, isolated, and without help. Israel, personified as a woman (Lam 1:8), was grieving and suffering. Then, God led her to confess her sins, "the Lord is in the right, for I have rebelled against his word" (Lam 1:18).

As fallen people, we went to blame our sin on others – even when its out

fault. Remember Adam in the Garden of Eden? He was tempted when Eve offered him the fruit, but it was Adam that broke God's command by eating of the tree that was forbidden (Gen 3:6). But when it came time to face the music, he blamed Eve (3:12). The best things we can do when we sin is confess our sin, repent of our sin, and make the necessary change to be faithful to God.

Solution: Trust him through change. Our sins bring punishment, cause pain, and cause problems in others and ourselves (i.e., Adam and Eve). Yet, all this discipline is intended to bring about change in our lives – change that results in turning from sin and to God (Heb 12:6). Daniel, another major prophet, shows us how to trust God through change, even change that must happen as a result of our own sins.

Daniel knew all about this. First, because of Israel's sins, he had to change kings. He was under King Jehoiakim's reign in Israel, when the nation was captured and conquered in 605 BC. Daniel was taken into Babylonian captivity along with Israel. The cultural, geographical, language, and political change was shocking. Yet, in spite of these changes, Daniel stayed faithful. Even when God's discipline was on the nation of Israel for her sins, Daniel stayed faithful to obey God through diet (Dan 1), refusing to worship the Babylonian idols (Dan 3), and being thrown into a lion's den (Dan 6). When God disciplines his people, he does it to bring his people back to faithfulness – which requires change. And while change is often difficult, believers are not alone. We have the presence of God and his people who are with us and help us through change.

Solution: Look with the prophets. Our first solution was to listen to the prophets to hear what they have to say, this one has to do with looking with the prophets to see what they see. This is where Ezekiel is helpful, because he was given visions of hope to share with God's people when they are sinning and suffering.

Look to the vision of dry bones. God gives Ezekiel a vision of a valley. Normally in a valley, even in a desert, a valley has at least a small flowing river. But in this vision, the valley is dry. There are dead men's bones everywhere, and they were

“very dry” (37:2). This means that since there’s no water, there’s no life. Everything is dead. Then, God asks Ezekiel an interesting question and gives a miraculous answer:

And he said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” And I answered, “O Lord GOD, you know.” Then he said to me, “Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD” (Eze 37:3-6).

If we look with Ezekiel to what God is showing him, we see a God who brings spiritually dead people to life through the preaching of God’s word. Here it is made plain: God sends his people (the prophets) to pursue his people (Israel) so that they can have life. When we sin, when we should know better yet still sin, God send people to us to guide us back to the path of life, and God’s miraculous power gives us new life through a new heart (Eze 36:22-32). This is why the prophets are so important. When we are feeling like Israel after she was captured and conquered – lonely, desolate, and spiritually dead – God’s prophets come to proclaim life through the preaching of his word.

Look to the vision of the temple. The temple was the center of religious life in Israel because there dwelt the presence of God. Israel’s sins were so bad that God departed from the temple on one of Ezekiel’s visions (Eze 10). But then God gives Ezekiel a vision of a new temple, one that is grand and glorious (Eze 40-48). It is a promise that God has not forsaken his people, and that his relationship with his people will be restored. He will dwell with his people again:

Then he led me to the gate, the gate facing east. And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east. And the sound of his coming was like the sound of many waters, and the earth shone with his glory. And the vision I saw was just like the vision that I had seen when he came to destroy the city, and just like the vision that I had seen by the Chebar canal. And I fell on my face. As the glory of the LORD entered the temple by the gate facing east, the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court; and behold, the glory of the LORD filled the temple (Eze 43:1-5).

Summary and Conclusion

In summary, Isaiah shows that God sends his people to tell not to put their trust in other things or other people. Jeremiah prophesizes to God's people that justice is coming, but he also tells them that when God's justice is upon them, they are to confess, turn from sin, and turn to God. This change is required of God's people, and Daniel shows us how to stay faithful when the disciplining hand of God brings about change in our lives. Finally, Ezekiel's vision gives us a promise and a hope when we have strayed from God. God sends his prophets to his people and promises that he will give them a new heart and will dwell with them forever.

Discussion Questions

There are two sections of questions: group and personal. Both sets of questions can be covered while at Discipleship Track. However, you are also encouraged to take the personal questions home and think about in your personal life from day to day and discuss with your parents. This way, you can have your parents encourage you, pray for you, and help walk with you as you seek to grow in Christ.

Group Questions and Discussion

1. Consider the prophets. What was the function of a prophet? Why did God send his people prophets? What were the people supposed to do in response?
2. Consider your prophets. What people function as prophets in your lives today?
3. Israel trusted in kings, idols, and their own unfaithful leaders instead of God. What are some things in our days that we are tempted to trust, or hope in, in more than God?
4. Consider knowing better. The prophet Hosea said, "There is no knowledge of God in the land ... my people are destroyed for lack of knowledge, because you have rejected knowledge" (Hos 4:1, 6). Israel had God's word, yet they failed to read it, believe it, and obey it. What are we to learn from Israel's history?

Personal Questions and Application

5. Consider your prophets. Think about those people who function in your life as prophets. Do you take time to listen to them? Do you take time to obey them? How can you grow in your ability to trust and obey the "prophets" in your life?
6. Consider doing better. Israel perished because they failed to read, believe, and obey God's law. What are some ways in your life that you can ensure that you read, believe, and obey God's word?