

## **Preface To The Prophets**

### **(1545 and 1532)**

To human reason the prophets seem of small account, and little of value is found in them. This is especially so when Master Wisehead comes along. He knows the Scriptures by heart and has them at his finger-tips, and out of the riches of his spirit, he regards the writings of the prophets as mere worthless, dead talk. That is why the lives and works of the prophets are no longer noticed, and only their words and histories are heard. This is no wonder, when God's Word, too, is despised, even though the signs and events, and the kingdom of Christ, as well, are daily before men's eyes; and how much more would it be despised, if the stories and the deeds were no longer extant. Just so the children of Israel despised God and His Word when they had before their eyes the manna, the fiery pillar and the bright cloud, and the priesthood and the principedom.

Therefore we Christians ought not be such shameful, sated, ungrateful wiseacres, but should read and use the] prophets with earnestness and profit. For, first of all, they proclaim and bear witness to the kingdom of Christ, in which we now live, and in which all believers in Christ have heretofore lived and will live until the end of the world. It is strong encouragement and encouraging strength to have for our Christian life such mighty and ancient witnesses by whom our Christian faith is greatly encouraged in the belief that it is the right station in the eyes of God, in contrast with all other wrong, false, human holiness and with the sects, which are a source of great offense and temptation to a weak heart, because of the great show that they make and of the multitude of their adherents, and, on the other hand, because of the Cross and of the small number of those who hold to the Christian faith. So, in our days, the hordes of the Turk, the pope, and others are great and powerful causes of offence.

For this, then, the prophets are useful to us; as St. Peter claims, in 1 Peter, that it was not unto themselves that the prophets made known the things that were revealed to them, but to us, "to us," he says, "they made them known." For they have thus "ministered to us," with their prophesying, in order that he who would be in Christ's kingdom might know that he must first suffer many things before he comes to glory, and that he must govern himself accordingly. By this we become sure of two things' first, that the great glory of Christ's kingdom is surely ours, and will come hereafter; and second, that it is preceded by crosses, shame, misery, contempt, and all kinds of suffering for Christ's sake. Thus we shall not become disheartened through impatience or unbelief, or doubt the future glory, which will be so great that the angels desire to see it.

In the second place, they show us many great examples and experiences illustrating the First Commandment, and it is portrayed in masterly fashion, in both words and illustrations, so as to drive us powerfully to fear of God and faith, and to keep us in them. For after they have prophesied of Christ's kingdom, all the rest is nothing but illustration of how God has so strictly and severely confirmed the First Commandment, and to read or hear the prophets is surely nothing else than to read and hear God's threats and comforts. God threatens the godless, who are careless and proud,

and if threatening does not help, He enforces it with penalties pestilence, famine, war, until they are destroyed; thus He makes good the threat of the First Commandment. But He comforts those who fear God and are in all sorts of need, and enforces His comfort with aid and counsel, by all kinds of wonders and signs, against all the might of the devil and the world' thus He also makes good the comfort of the First Commandment.

With such sermons and illustrations the prophets minister richly to us, teaching us that we need not be offended when we see how carelessly and proudly the godless despise God's Word, and pay no heed to His threatenings, as though God were a mere nothing; for in the prophets we see that things have never turned out well for any man who has despised God's threatening, even though they were the mightiest emperors and kings and the holiest and most learned people on whom the sun ever shone. On the other hand, we see that no one has been deserted who has dared to rely upon God's comforts and promises, even though they were the most miserable and the poorest sinners and beggars that were ever on the earth, nay, even though it were a slain Abel and a swallowed Jonah. By this the prophets prove to us that God keeps to His First Commandment, and wills to be a gracious Father to the poor and believing, and that for Him no one is to be too small or too despised; on the other hand He wills to be an angry Judge to the godless and the proud, and no one is to be too great, too mighty, too wise, too holy for Him, whether it be emperor, pope, Turk, and the devil beside.

For this reason it is, in our days, profitable and necessary to read the prophets, so that, by these illustrations and sermons we may be strengthened and encouraged against the unspeakable, innumerable, and (if God will) the final causes of offense given by the damned world. How completely the Turk holds our Lord Jesus Christ and His Kingdom for a mere nothing, compared with himself and his Mohammed! How greatly the poor Gospel and God's Word are despised, both among us and under the papacy, compared with the glorious show and riches of human commandments and holiness! How carelessly the fanatics, the Epicureans, and others like them walk in their own opinions, contrary to Holy Scripture! What an utterly audacious, wild life everyone now lives, following his own self-will, contrary to the clear truth, now as plain as day! It seems as though neither God nor Christ were anything; stiff less does it seem that God's First Commandment was so strict! But they say, "Wait a bit, wait a bit! Suppose the prophets are lying, and deceiving us with their histories and sermons!" More kings than they, and mightier, yes, and worse knaves than they, have gone to destruction; and these will not escape. Needier and more wretched people, too, have been gloriously helped; and we shall not be deserted. They are not the first to be defiant and boastful, and we are not the first who have suffered and been tormented. See, it is thus that we make the prophets useful to ourselves; read in this way, the reading of them is fruitful.

To be sure, there is in them more of threatening and rebuke than of encouragement and promise, and it is good to observe the reason. The godless are always more in number than the righteous; therefore one must always be more insistent on the law than on the promises. Even without the promises, the godless feel secure, and they are most agile in applying the divine encouragements and promises to themselves and the threats and rebukes to others, and they do not let themselves be

turned, by any means, from this perverted notion and false hope. For their motto is Pax et securitas , “There is no need!” They stick to that, and go with it to destruction, as St. Paul says, “Destruction cometh upon them suddenly.”

Again, since the prophets cry out most of all against idolatry, it is necessary to know the form which this idolatry had; for in our time, under the papacy, many people flatter themselves pleasantly and think that they are no such idolaters as the children of Israel. For this reason, then, they do not think highly of the prophets, especially of this part of them, because the rebukes upon idolatry do not concern them at all. They are far too pure and holy to commit idolatry, and it would be laughable for them to be afraid or terrified because of threats and denunciations against idolatry. That is just what the people of Israel also did. They simply would not believe that they were idolatrous, and therefore the threatenings of the prophets had to be lies, and they themselves had to be condemned as heretics.

The children of Israel were not such mad saints as to worship plain wood and stone, especially the kings, princes, priests, and prophets, though they were the most idolatrous of all; but their idolatry consisted in letting go of the worship which God had instituted and ordered at Jerusalem, and where else God would have it, and improving on it, establishing it and setting it up elsewhere, according to their own ideas and opinions, without God’s command, and inventing new forms and persons and times for it, though Moses had strictly forbidden this, especially in Deuteronomy 12, and pointed them to the place that God had chosen for His tabernacle and dwelling-place. This false worship was their idolatry, and they thought it a fine and precious thing, and relied upon it as though they had done well in performing it, though it was sheer disobedience and apostasy from God and His commands.

Thus we read in 1 Kings 12:28, not simply that Jeroboam set up the two calves, but had it preached to the people besides, “Ye shall no more go up to Jerusalem; lo, here, Israel, is thy God, who led thee out of Egypt.” He does not say, “Lo, here, Israel, is a calf,” but “Here is thy God who led thee out of Egypt.” He confesses freely that the God of Israel is the true God and that he led them out of Egypt; but men are not to run to Jerusalem after Him, but rather to find Him here at Dan and Beersheba, where the golden calves are. The meaning is: — One can sacrifice to God and worship Him as well before the golden calves as before a holy symbol of God, for so men sacrificed to Him and worshiped Him before the golden ark. Lo, that is deserting the worship of God at Jerusalem, and thereby denying God, who has commanded that worship, as though He had not commanded it. So they built on their own works and devotion and not purely and alone on God.

With this devotion they afterwards filled the land with idolatry; on all the hills, in all the valleys, under all the trees they sacrificed and burned incense, and all this had to be called serving the God of Israel; he who said otherwise was a heretic and false prophet. That is the real committing of idolatry, — undertaking to worship God, without God’s bidding, out of one’s own devotion; for He will not have us teach Him how He is to be served. He wills to teach us and to prescribe His worship; His Word is to be there and it shall give us light and leading. Without His Word it is all

idolatry and lies, however devout it seems, and however beautiful it seeks to be. Of this we have often written.

From this it follows that among us Christians all those men are idolatrous, and the prophets' denunciations apply to them, who have invented or still keep new ways to worship God without God's order and commandment, out of their own devotion, and, as they say, with good intentions. For by this they surely put their reliance on works that they themselves have chosen and not simply and solely on Jesus Christ. In the prophets these people are called adulteresses, who are not content with their own' husband, Jesus Christ, but run after other men, as though Christ alone could not help, without us and our works, or as though He alone had not redeemed us, but we must also do something toward it. And yet we know very well that we did nothing toward having Him die on the Cross, taking our sins upon Him and bearing them on the Cross, not only before the whole world could think of any such thing, but before we were born. Just as little, and even less, did the children of Israel do toward bringing the plagues upon Egypt and Pharaoh and setting themselves free through the death of the first-born of Egypt. God did this alone, and they did nothing at all toward it.

"Nay," say they, "the children of Israel served idols with their worship, and not the true God, but we serve in our churches the true God and the one Lord Jesus Christ, for we know no idols." I answer: That is what the children of Israel also said. All of them declared that their worship was given to the true God, and even less than our clergy would they permit anyone to call it the serving of idols. On this account they killed and persecuted all the true prophets; for they, too, would know nothing of idols, as the histories tell us.

For thus we read in Judges 17:1, that the mother of Micah, when he had taken from her the eleven hundred pieces of silver, and returned them, said to him, "Blessed be my son from the Lord. I vowed this silver to the Lord, that my son shall take the silver and have a graven image made of it, etc." Here one learns clearly and certainly that the mother is thinking of the true God, to whom she has vowed the silver, to have a graven image made of it. She does not say, "I have vowed the silver to an idol," but "to the Lord," which name is known among all Jews as the name of the one true God. The Turk also does the same thing; he names the true God in His worship and means Him who created heaven and earth. Likewise do the Jews, Tartars, and now all unbelievers. Nevertheless, it is all sheer idolatry.

Again how strange was the fall of that wonderful man Gideon! To the children of Israel, who desired that he and his children should rule over them, he said, "I will not be your lord, nor will my children, but the Lord (that is, the true God) shall be your lord." And yet he took the jewels that they gave him and made of them, not an image or an altar, but a priest's garment, and out of devotion, he wanted to have a worshiping of God in his own city. But the Scripture says that all Israel committed harlotry with it, and this house went to destruction because of it. Now this great and holy man was not thinking of any idol, but of the one true God, as his spirited words bear witness, when he says, "The Lord shall rule over you, not I." By these words he plainly gives honor to God alone and

confesses only the true God and will have Him held as God and Lord.

So, too, we heard above that Jeroboam does not call his golden calves idols, but the God of Israel, who has led them out of Egypt; and this was the only true God, for no idol had led them out of Egypt. Nor was it his intention to worship idols, but because he feared (as the text says) that the people would fall away from him to the King of Judah, if they were to go to Jerusalem, according to custom, to worship God, he invented a worship of his own, by which he held them to him, and yet intended by it to worship the true God, who dwelt at Jerusalem; but it was not to be necessary to worship God in Jerusalem only.

Why many words? God Himself confesses that the children of Israel intended to worship, not an idol, but Him alone; for He says, in Hosea 2, “At that day, saith the Lord, thou shalt call me ‘My husband’ and call me no more ‘My master’. For I will take the name of the Baalim out of her mouth, so that one shall no more remember this name of Baalim.” Here one must confess it true that the children of Israel intended to worship no idol, but the one true God. God says plainly, here in Hosea, “Thou shalt call me no more ‘My Baal’.” Now the worship of Baal was the greatest, commonest, and most glorious worship in the people of Israel, and yet it was utter idolatry, despite the fact that by it they intended to worship the true God.

Therefore it helps our clergy not at all to allege that in their churches and chapters they serve no idol, but only God, the true Lord. For here you learn that it is not enough to say or think, ‘I am doing it to God’s glory; I mean it for the true God; I will serve the only God.’ All idolaters say and intend that. Intentions and thoughts do not count, or those who martyred the apostles and the Christians would also have been God’s servants, for they, too, thought that they were doing God service, as Christ says in John 16:2; and Paul in Romans 10:2, testifies for the Jews that they are zealous for God, and says in Acts 26:7, that by serving God night and day they hope to come to the promised salvation.

On the contrary, let everyone have a care to be sure that his service of God is instituted by God’s Word, and not invented out of his own devotion or good intention. One who is accustomed to serve God in ways that have no testimony of God for them ought to know that he is serving, not the true God, but an idol that he has imagined for himself, that is to say, he is serving his own notions and false ideas, and thereby is serving the devil himself, and the words of all the prophets are against him. For this God, who would let us establish worship for Him according to our own choice and devotion, without His command and Word, — this God is nowhere; but there is only one God, who, through His Word, has abundantly established and commanded all the stations and the services in which it is His will to be served. We should abide by this and not turn aside from it either to right or left; do neither more nor less; make it neither worse nor better. Otherwise there will be no end of idolatry and it will be impossible to distinguish between true worship and idolatry, since all have the true God in mind, and all use His true Name. To this one and only God be thanks and praise, through Jesus Christ, His Son, our Lord blessed forever. Amen.