

Lesson 13

- The books of the Old Testament 2
- God punishes his people
- The church

Lesson 13a

The books of the Old Testament 2

In lesson 11a we looked at the law, the historical books and the poetical books. In this lesson we will discuss the last 16 books of the Old Testament, the prophets.

A prophet's work

Many people think a prophet is someone with a special gift to know the future. This is not an accurate description of the prophets in the bible. They are not magicians who can tell the future by laying cards or looking into a crystal ball. They do not work by their own power. One of the prophets, Amos, explains very clearly what his work is:

Amos 3:7-8

'Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets. The lion has roared – who will not fear? The Sovereign LORD has spoken – who can but prophesy?'

The prophets are men sent by God, to reveal his plans and pass on his message. The bible calls a prophet's message a prophecy.

The content of the prophecies

A prophecy can consist of different elements. First of all, the prophets bring people a message for their own time. The Israelites' unfaithfulness to God is usually the reason for the prophets to bring their messages. They call people to account when they have broken the covenant with God and no longer rely on Him but rather on the worship of idols. They show them that their society is full of injustice. The prophets urge the nation to return to God. Their message usually comes with a warning. If the people refuse to listen God will punish them. God never punishes without warning; He always gives people the time to repent.

The prophets often announce a time of judgement because if the people do not return to God, He will have to punish them.

Nevertheless, in the bible a prophecy of judgement often turns into a prophecy of salvation. The prophets tell the people that after the time of judgement a time of blessing will follow. God will have mercy on his people once again.

Some of the prophecies look further ahead into the future.

They tell of the coming Saviour, of his suffering, death and resurrection and of the coming of a new world.

We know now that all the prophecies about the coming and the work of Jesus have been fulfilled. The message for us is that God is faithful to his promises even when the contrary seems true in our world.

An overview of the time of the prophets

We find prophecies in sixteen of the books in the bible. The books have been named after the prophets who bring God's message. They feature in the bible in order of size. First of all there are the 'great prophets': Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. Their books are followed by the books of the 'small prophets'. This division can be confusing. The terms 'great' and 'small' have nothing to do with the importance of the prophets or their messages. Every prophecy is the word of God.

Another disadvantage of listing the prophets in order of size is that it confuses their order in time. It is easier to understand the prophecies when we place them in their historical context as we find it in the historical books. This gives us another division: the time before, during and after the captivity.

Prophets before the captivity

- Prophets in Israel

God called Amos to go from Judah to Israel. In the name of God, he objects to the hypocrisy that he sees in the people of Israel. They pretend to be devout but meanwhile the poor are treated badly and there is no justice in the land. Amos tells the people that God cannot accept the way they live. However, the

people don't listen to him. They tell Amos to leave the country but he stays to finish the task God has given him.

The prophet Hosea has more than just a verbal message. God calls him into a marriage that symbolises the relationship between God and Israel. The people of Israel have broken the covenant and started to worship idols. Hosea's wife leaves him to become a prostitute. The way the people treat God is like the way Hosea's wife treats her husband. Israel is committing adultery.

- Prophets in Judah

We know very little about the prophet Joel. He brings his short message just after the country has suffered from a plague of locusts. He compares the judgement that is to come over Judah and Jerusalem to this plague. An unspecified enemy shall plunder the nation if the people do not return to God. Joel also announces that God will restore the country.

The book of Joel contains a prophecy about the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The prophet Micah lived in the same time as Isaiah. He announces that both Jerusalem and Samaria, the capitals of Judah and Israel, will come under attack and be captured. God can no longer tolerate the injustice in the nations.

When Zephaniah brings his message to Judah, the Israelites have already been taken into exile to Assyria. The Judean people think that God does not care about their sinful lives. They hope that God will punish their enemies but protect Judah. Zephaniah comes to tell them this will not happen. Judah will be punished first if they do not return to God. Only if they do God will punish the enemies.

Just before Judah is attacked, Habakkuk asks God why He tolerates so much injustice and misery. And how can God use a nation, where the situation is even worse, to punish the Judeans? God tells Habakkuk that a believer should trust God

in everything. He promises to restore everything for the believer, be it in his time and in his way. God has authority over all the nations and He knows what is best. He will punish the Babylonians who only trust in themselves.

From Jeremiah's prophecy we know how difficult the life of a prophet could be. He tells how the Judeans despise him more and more. Instead of considering God's words, they hate the bringer of his message. We read how Jeremiah is abused; people try to kill him and he is imprisoned for long periods of time. From time to time Jeremiah is tempted to give up. Jeremiah himself lives to see the fulfilment of his prophecy: Jerusalem falls into the hands of the Babylonians.

Prophets during the captivity

The warnings of the prophets have not brought the people of Judah to repentance. The Babylonian army takes over Judah and destroys Jerusalem. The neighbouring nation, Edom, takes advantage of the situation and mixes in with the enemy in order to plunder the city. Obadiah presents a dreadful prophecy about the punishment of the Edomites.

After Judah has been defeated, some prophets are taken into exile. One of them, Ezekiel, has a message of hope and encouragement for the people in captivity. Daniel has been taken to Babylon as a boy. In lesson 14b we will discuss him.

Prophets after the captivity

After the captivity when the people have returned to their country, they need to rebuild the temple and the city of Jerusalem. During that time God also sends prophets. The prophet Haggai encourages the people in the restoration of the temple.

Zechariah and Malachi warn the people not to fall back into their former sins. Malachi's prophecy ends in a message of hope. He looks forward to the coming of the Saviour and announces a prophet who will come to prepare his coming.

The books of the Old Testament 2

God not only sends prophets to his own people. He is aware of the destructive effects of sin beyond the Israelite borders. Nineveh, the capital of Assyria is an example of a city where people live in sin. Their sin is so dreadful that God wants to interfere. He calls the prophets Jonah to go to Nineveh to call its inhabitants to repentance.

After only one century the situation in Nineveh is as bad as it was before and God sends another prophet, Nahum. His prophecy is fulfilled when Nineveh is completely destroyed.

Man's inadequacy demands a Saviour

After reading the Old Testament it is very clear that man does not love God and his fellow human the way God intended. This is true for everyone. It is even visible in God's own people. They might have a desire to serve God but again and again the Israelites choose a life without God. Judges, kings and prophets have not been able to change the nation throughout the time of the Old Testament. They need something more. Someone needs to come who can bring complete and permanent salvation. The Old Testament not only shows the need for a saviour, it moreover promises a saviour. God himself is preparing the way for his coming.

Questions

- 1a.** What is generally the content of a prophecy of salvation?
- 1b.** What specific messages do the prophecies of salvation have for Israel for the long term and the short term?
- 1c.** Do the prophecies of salvation have a message for us?
- 2.** More than once the prophecies announce God's punishment. How does God's love speak through these prophecies?

Lesson 13b

God punishes his people

When king Solomon starts to worship other gods, God announces a punishment; Solomon's descendants will no longer rule over the whole of Israel. The kingdom will be divided into two parts.

God's punishment: the division

When Solomon dies his son Rehoboam becomes king. However, the people in the northern part of the country refuse to regard him as their king. They choose another man to rule over them, Jeroboam.

From that moment the kingdom is divided into two parts. The descendants of David and Solomon now only rule over the tribe of Judah and a part of the tribe of Benjamin. This part is called the two tribes or Judah, and Jerusalem remains its political and religious centre.

The other part of the kingdom is now called the ten tribes or Israel. Samaria becomes the capital of this kingdom. Israel is not reigned by kings from one single family. Several different houses follow one another in the monarchy.

The history of Israel and Judah

From now on the two kingdoms have separate histories. In this lesson we will see what happens to both kingdoms in the following centuries. We will do so looking at the two basic rules for God's people:

- Love the LORD your God with all your heart.
- Love your neighbour as yourself.

These two rules form a summary of the Ten Commandments that God had given to Israel.

Israel's love for God

To love God means to do what He wants. Love for God is shown in obedience to his rules. Israel shows very little obedience throughout the centuries. The first king, Jeroboam starts as a bad example.

Read: 1 Kings 12:25-32

12:31 *high places*: the high places on which the Canaanites used to worship their idols

Jeroboam is afraid he will rule as a king for very long. He thinks that when his citizens visit the temple in Jerusalem for their yearly festivals they might want to belong to Judah. His solution is to build two shrines within his own kingdom, in Dan and Bethel, in the north and the south. In the shrines he places golden calves. The people will no longer need to go to Jerusalem to bring their sacrifices because in Dan and Bethel they can find the gods who have led them out of Egypt. When Jeroboam makes these calves, he does not care about God's will. Moreover, he appoints priests from every different tribe while God only wanted priests from the tribe of Levi. On top of that, Jeroboam appoints new festivals and brings his own sacrifices. God only allowed priests to bring sacrifices. God warns Jeroboam. He sends a prophet who tells him that God does not approve of his behaviour. However, Jeroboam is not impressed. He tells his servants to imprison the prophet.

How do Jeroboam's citizens react to the behaviour of their king? Some people, many priests, strongly disagree. They move to Judah. However, most people totally agree with what Jeroboam does. They are delighted with the carved idols that their king has made.

The shrines in Dan and Bethel do not disappear for centuries. Throughout that time the Israelites worship God in a way that He has forbidden in his law. During the rule of Ahab, a later king, it becomes even worse when the Israelites start to worship other gods. Ahab builds a temple for Baal, the god of fertility and the worship of Baal becomes the national religion.

After him, another king stops the worship of Baal in Israel but he does not remove the shrines in Dan and Bethel.

We can tell from the books of 1 and 2 Kings that throughout the history of Israel the commandment to love God is broken again and again.

Israel's love for the neighbour

When it comes to the other rule, it is not much better. Although Israel is wealthy and powerful, the poor people are oppressed. The system of justice is corrupt; judges take bribes. The trade is unfair and theft and murder become daily normalities. As an example we will look at the story of Ahab and Naboth.

King Ahab has set his mind on a piece of land adjacent to his palace gardens. The piece of land is a vineyard that belongs to Naboth. Ahab asks Naboth to sell him the vineyard. However, Naboth refuses to do so because Israelites are not allowed to sell the land that belongs to their family. When the Israelites came to Canaan, God had divided the land between all the families. God decided that the land had to go from father to son and was not to be sold. Israel was not to become a nation of a few wealthy landowners and many poor people serving on their land.

Ahab is furious about Naboth's refusal to sell his vineyard. His wife Jezebel wants to help him out. She tells the governors of Naboth's town to hire two men who will publicly accuse Naboth of serious crime and then the governors will have to give him the death penalty.

What Jezebel had asked for happens. Naboth is unjustly accused and with two witnesses the case is settled. The people believe that Naboth is guilty and stone him to death. Ahab then takes Naboth's vineyard.

God warns Israel

When things like this happen, God is not just a mere spectator. Again and again He warns people. He sends his prophets, Elijah, Elisha, Amos, Hosea. In danger of their own lives, they pass on God's message. The prophets confront people with

their wicked deeds and announce that if they do not change, God will punish them.

Amos 5:27

'Therefore I will send you into exile beyond Damascus, says the LORD'

Amos 7:9

'The high places of Isaac will be destroyed and the sanctuaries of Israel will be ruined; with my sword I will rise against the house of Jeroboam'

The high places of Isaac: the forbidden sanctuaries of Isaac's descendants, the Israelites

The prophets also call people to return to God:

Hosea 14:2-3

'Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God. Your sins have been your downfall! Take words with you and return to the LORD. Say to him: Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously.'

Israel's punishment: exile

Nevertheless, whatever the prophets tell the Israelites, they do not return to God. Therefore, God decides to do what He warned would happen, He has the Assyrians take the Israelites into exile.

Even during Israel's journey through the desert God already warned the people for this punishment. Even then He told them: 'If you do not listen to me and ignore my commandments, I will punish you. If you do not repent I will cause your enemies to rise against you and take you into exile'.

Judah's love for God

When we look at the history of Judah we see that their love for God is often greater than that of Israel. That is to say, after the deaths of their first two kings, Rehoboam and Abijah.

God punishes his people

Rehoboam allows people to bring sacrifices to idols and even indulge in prostitution as part of the worship of those idols. The bible says of Rehoboam's son Abijah:

1 Kings 15:3 *'He committed all the sins his father had done before him; his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his forefather had been'.*

However, after Abijah, Asa becomes king of Judah. He removes and destroys all the idols. The bible says of him:

1 Kings 15:11 *'Asa did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, as his father David had done'.*

After Asa there are more kings who serve God, for example, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah and Josiah. They manage to bring the people back onto the right track. In between these kings others reign who ignore God. One example is king Manasseh. The bible says of him that he behaves like the Canaanites who used to live in the country and whom were banned from the country because of their wickedness. He builds altars for Baal and worships the sun, moon and stars. Inside God's temple he builds altars for idols and erects a statue of the goddess Asherah*. He seduces his citizens to worship the idols with him.

From the books of 1 and 2 Kings we see that whatever good there has been in Judah, it all ends as bad as in Israel.

Judah's love for the neighbour

In this respect the situation in Judah is much like that in Israel. When a king gives the wrong example, the people do the exact same thing.

People with high positions in society take the houses and land of the less powerful. Judges take bribes. The poor are treated unjustly and foreigners, orphans and widow, the weakest in society, are oppressed. Innocent people are being killed.

Things like stealing, murdering, committing adultery and giving

false testimonies have become normalities in Judah. However, the Judeans are not afraid that God will punish them. They feel safe because they live in Jerusalem, the residence of God. God would never allow his city and his temple to be destroyed.

God warns Judah

God also sends his prophets to Judah: Isaiah, Jeremiah and Micah. Their message is the same as the message of the prophets in Israel. They point out the bad conduct of the people and call them to change their way of life. They warn of God's punishment. They tell the Judeans that they are not automatically protected in Jerusalem. If they do not repent their fate will be the same as that of the Israelites. God will cast them away.

We will look at two passages from Isaiah as an illustration.

The case in court

Read: Isaiah 1:2-3

In the book that carries his name, the prophet Isaiah shows from the start what the situation is between God and his people. Their wickedness has come to a point that God has called the Judeans to court. God calls on the heaven and the earth to testify as his witnesses when He accuses his people. God has raised his people as if they were his own children, but now they do not even seem to know who He is. Even a cow or a donkey would know its own master, but Israel seems to have forgotten who God is.

The vineyard

A while later, probably around the celebration of the grape harvest, Isaiah again sets out what Judah's situation is like. He sings a song.

Read: Isaiah 5:1-7

5:7 *the house of Israel*: the people of Israel, in this case Judah.

Isaiah's listeners do not immediately understand what he means. He seems to be singing a topical song about a friend who owns a vineyard.

The friend does every effort for the vineyard. He takes the stones from the ground; he surrounds it with a wall to protect it from wild animals; he builds a tower to guard it. It must have come as surprise for the audience to hear that this vineyard, which had taken up so much effort, does not bring forth good grapes.

Then Isaiah lets the friend himself speak. He asks the listeners to judge the situation. What do you do with such a vineyard? Every Israelite would say that you should waste no more energy on it.

Then Isaiah comes with his message: 'You are the vineyard. My friend is Jahweh. You deserve the same fate as the vineyard'.

Judah is also taken captive

Despite the many warnings of people like Isaiah and Jeremiah the people do not return to God. The punishment of God's warning is therefore irrevocable. Judah is taken into exile. We will further discuss the captivity in the next lesson.

Questions

- 1a. Why does Jeroboam place golden calves in Dan and Bethel?
- 1b. Why is that the wrong thing to do? Read Exodus 20:4-6 and Exodus 20:22-23.
- 2a. For each of the kings listed below, indicate which kingdom they ruled. You might want to look at the table with map 6 in the *Helping Hand*.
- 2b. Indicate for every king whether he served God or not.

Ahab
Abijah
Asa
David

Hezekiah
Jeroboam
Jehoshaphat
Josiah
Manasseh
Rehoboam
Salomon

3. What could you say about king Ahab's conduct in the light of the two commandments that have been discussed in this lesson?
4. Everything can become an idol. Explain.

Lesson 13c The church

In this lesson and the coming three lessons we will discuss the ninth article of the Apostolic Creed: 'I believe in the holy catholic [apostolic or universal] church; the communion of saints'.

Is a church necessary?

In our society the church is no longer very popular. Statistics show that less and less people go to church. (In the year 1900 98 out of 100 people in The Netherlands belonged to a church. By the late eighties this figure had dropped to only 49 out of 100.)

The number of people who do not belong to a church continues to grow and, of the people who do belong to a church, a large number do not go regularly.

Do you need a church to believe? Isn't it perfectly possible to be a believer without a church? Many people who do not or no longer belong to a church, claim to believe in God. They do not see the need for a church because they believe that faith is something personal. Some do not want to go to church because they have been disappointed by church members. However, when we take the bible seriously we need to admit that a believer cannot do without a church. Faith is personal but you cannot be a believer by yourself. We will now look at what the bible teaches about the church.

The church: a flock of sheep

Why does a believer need the church? What is the function of the church? One way to come to an understanding is to study the image that the bible often uses for the church, that of a flock of sheep.

In the Old Testament the church is often compared to a flock of sheep under the leadership of a shepherd. This was a familiar image to the Israelites and to them it clarified the relationship between God and his people. Just like a shepherd takes care of his sheep, God takes care of the people who

believe in Him. He leads them, protects them and takes care of them. They are safe with Him and like a shepherd goes out to find a sheep that is lost, God looks for the people who have walked away from Him. He knows that they will not survive if they try to live without the flock and without the shepherd. When Jesus came to earth He also used this image. He called himself the good shepherd. His sheep are the people who believe in Him. Together they form his flock. The good shepherd will always protect his flock even if it costs him his own life. He loves his sheep:

John 10:11

'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep'.

Jesus proves his words to be true when He dies on the cross. As a good shepherd he gives up his own life to save his sheep from the death.

The work of a shepherd

When we summarise what we learn about the relationship between Jesus and the church from the image of a shepherd and a flock of sheep, there are three main points.

1. A shepherd calls his sheep together every day. He makes sure that all the different sheep form a flock together. In the same way God calls people who believe in Jesus together. He does not want them to stand alone but to form a congregation.
2. Just like a shepherd protects his flock from the danger of wild animals, Jesus protects the church from the attacks of Satan. With Him the members of the church are safe.
3. A shepherd makes sure that his sheep have enough to eat and to drink. Jesus takes care of his church. The believers will find abundance with Him.

For a sheep it is fatal to remain with the flock. It is the only place where he can enjoy the protection and care of the shepherd. In the same way it is crucial for a believer to belong

to a church. In a church he can count on the protection and care of the shepherd, Jesus Christ.

How is that possible in this time? Hasn't Jesus gone to heaven? Does the flock really have a shepherd? Haven't they been left alone?

The shepherd appoints other shepherds to help Him

After his death, Jesus went to heaven. However, that does not mean He abandoned his sheep. On the contrary, Jesus still takes care of his church. He appointed men who could shepherd the church in his place under his authority. Men who would lead the church in his name and who would protect and take care of the church.

In the early days of the church those men were the apostles, the people who had been Jesus' disciples and who had been with Him from the beginning. When they went out into the world to tell people about Jesus, many became believers. This is how the first churches came into being.

The first leaders in these churches were the apostles. They would be the organisers and every Sunday they would teach. Soon the apostles started to appoint *elders* or *overseers*, men who were to act as shepherds and take care of the flock of Jesus Christ. Together these elders would lead the church and make sure that no one would go astray.

Some elders received the special task of teaching the church. They would preach to the church and explain to them what God tells us in the bible.

The churches also appointed deacons. They were members of the church who would help the poor and the ill.

Today we no longer have apostles. That role was only for people who had known Jesus during his life on earth. We do still have elders in the church. Their role is to build up their fellow believers in their faith. They are also responsible for order in the church. An elder with the special responsibility for teaching and preaching is now often called a pastor or a reverend.

The people who collect money in the church and give it to those in need, are still called deacons. The deacons need to be aware of the needs and problems of church members. They make sure the people receive the help they need. They do not always give that help themselves. They might ask other members of the church to help out in certain situations.

Ordinary people

Elders, pastors and deacons are all ordinary people like you and me. They are church members, sinful like the rest of us and with the same responsibilities and rights. The only difference is that they have received the special task from Christ to lead and take care of the church.

They are not the only people who have a task in the church. All church members should help one another to grow in faith and every church member has the responsibility to tell another member when they are living in sin. Everyone should look out for the other's need. The members of a church can do so because the Holy Spirit works in all of them, not only in those who have received a special task.

Elders and deacons should be an example to the church members in their care for the church. A pastor is not the head of the church, rather Jesus Christ is. He is the main shepherd who ultimately leads his flock. He uses people to be leaders under his authority.

The church is indispensable

Even after his ascension Jesus has remained actively engaged with his church. You could say that we still hear his voice in the church. In the church Christians will hear how Christ wants them to live. They will feel his love and care for them. If they are going through a difficult time, they will be encouraged. When they are sad, they will be comforted. Even though Jesus is in heaven, He still protects and cares for the people who belong to Him.

From the bible we know that the church is indispensable for believers. It is vital for a Christian to belong to a church because only there they are in the safe arms of Jesus Christ.

The church

The church is holy

The Apostolic Creed calls the church holy and catholic, or universal. Holiness and universality are two important aspects of the church.

First of all, the church is called holy. Can that be said of the church? Is the church in reality always holy?

No, it is not and that is not what the Creed means either. When the church is called holy, it means to say that it belongs to God. God the Father has established a relationship with the church. His Son has saved the people that belong to the church by offering his life for them. And the Holy Spirit works in them. Because the Holy God has saved the members of the church from death and placed them on his side, we can call the church holy.

This does not mean that the people in the church can do whatever they like because their lives are safe anyway. Whoever belongs to God has to lead a holy life. Holiness is therefore not only an aspect of what the church is, it is moreover a mission for the members of the church to become holy.

The church is universal

Besides holy, the church is universal. That is to say, the church is not bound to a specific place or time or to a specific land or people. The church exists of believer from all over the world.

The church is not an invention of our age. It has always existed. Even Adam and Eve, Abel, Seth, Enosh and Noah belonged to the church. Everyone who served God belonged to the church.

From Abraham's time onward the church was mainly made up of Israelites. In that time the church existed in the members of a nation, the descendants of Abraham. All the Israelites belonged to God and served Him. For that reason the bible

calls the Israelites, God's people. In the same way the church can be called the people of God.

Did all the Israelites belong to the church? No, there were exceptions. There were men who did not want to be circumcised and there were people who no longer belonged to God's people because they had committed certain crimes. They were banned from the church.

There were also people who were not Israelites, but who did belong to the church. They believed in God and wanted to be circumcised. They became part of God's people.

Nevertheless, in the time of the Old Testament the church existed largely of Israelites. However, this changed in the time of the New Testament.

After Jesus had ascended into heaven and the Holy Spirit had come to earth, people from all nations were called to repentance to the living God. The Holy Spirit caused numerous people from all over the world to believe in Jesus Christ.

Together they became one people, the people of God. This way God fulfilled his promise to Abraham that he would become the father of many nations. God regards Christians from every nation as children of Abraham. Not because they have the same descent but because they share the same faith as Abraham. A Christian is a child of Abraham when he believes in God and completely trusts in Him for everything, like Abraham.

In the time of the Old Testament all natural descendants of Abraham automatically belonged to the people of God. However, after the coming of the Holy Spirit all heirs of Abraham's faith belong to God's people, the church.

The church has always existed and will always exist. The fact that God takes care of that shows how important the church is. In the next lesson we will continue to look at the importance of the church. We will also discuss what a good church is and how we can recognise the church of Jesus Christ.

Questions

1. What does the image of a flock say about the church?
2. No Christian can do without the church. Why not?
3. The Apostolic Creed calls the church holy and catholic. Explain briefly what that means.