

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care,¹¹ trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.¹² It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things. 1 Peter 1:10-12

Waiting for the Savior – Striving to Understand

A few weeks ago in Bible class, I mentioned the fact that in the Old Testament, God prophesied that Jesus would come. Immediately a hand went up. A member asked about what the Jewish people understood from those prophecies, since, she said, “Whenever I read those prophecies, I never get *that* out of them.” “That,” of course, is the meaning that the New Testament, or perhaps her pastor, tells her that the prophecy has. Have you ever wondered about that? This year during our midweek Advent services, we’re going to focus on Old Testament prophecy and what it meant to be an Old Testament believer. The theme of these messages is “Waiting for the Savior.” Tonight, St. Peter tells us that while they were waiting, they were **striving to understand**.

I.

It might be best to begin with a personal observation: I think that Old Testament prophecy is some of the hardest stuff in the Bible. Does it make you feel better to hear your pastor say that? Well, Peter tells us tonight that the Old Testament prophets themselves probably would’ve agreed while they were **striving to understand what God was saying**.

Peter says, **“Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.”** That’s kind of a mouthful, isn’t it? This whole extended sentence is “concerning . . . salvation.” The prophets spoke of the grace that was to come. That’s a reference to Jesus! But Peter says that they had to search intently and with the greatest care, because it wasn’t easy for them. What made these prophecies so hard? One difficulty is that God often inspired the prophets to speak of Jesus’ first coming in Bethlehem and his second coming on Judgment Day in the same breath. And sometimes, he even throws other stuff in there. So sometimes, it feels like we’re trying to untie a knot in fishing line. We’d like to just cut it and start over, but we don’t have that option when it comes to God’s Word.

Another thing that makes this difficult is the fact that God often used word pictures and poetic language. Now, there are places where God just says, “This is what’s going to happen” like when he says that a virgin will conceive and bear a son. But many times, he says things like, “He will sit on David’s throne forever” or “Rise, shine for your light has come” or “I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your Seed and her seed.” Then you add to that the prophecies that we call “types” – the ones where God took something they knew and made it a picture of Christ. The sacrifices were picture of Jesus dying on the cross. King David was a picture of the true King and so on. All those pictures and all that poetic language can really challenge us when we sit down with the Old Testament and try to see Jesus there.

But the real difficulty with Old Testament prophecy is that God is talking about the future. Now, he knows exactly what is going to happen and he always has. And he could have just spelled it all out, in plain and simple language. But even if he had done that, would it have helped? What I mean is, we don’t know the future and sometimes, it’s pretty hard for us to imagine. In the 1940’s, a 20th Century Fox executive predicted that television would be a passing fad. He just couldn’t imagine people voluntarily sitting night after night and staring a plywood box. What’s life really going to be like in a few decades? If we live that long, we might be surprised. The prophets weren’t talking about life in a few decades. God showed them events that lay hundreds of years in the future. The world was going to change and change again before they came true.

For all those reasons, Old Testament prophecy presents challenges to us. And it did to the prophets themselves. Peter says that they searched intently and with the greatest care trying to find out the time and the

circumstances that the Spirit of Christ *in them* was pointing to. So I can just see Micah writing by inspiration of the Holy Spirit that the king would come from the little town of Bethlehem and then wondering when and how that would happen. Micah couldn't see Joseph and Mary traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem because a foreign emperor wanted to take a census. He could only see that the Savior had to come from the ancestral town of King David. He had to read and watch and wonder.

But the Holy Spirit gave them those prophecies. They knew they were talking about salvation. Peter says that the Spirit was telling them about the suffering of Christ and the glories that would follow. That's so clear to us today when we look at Psalm 22 and we hear Jesus say, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" or Isaiah 53 where he is stricken, smitten and afflicted. We see the sufferings. And we see the glory in the child that was born to us, the son that was given to us who name is the Prince of Peace. God was pointing to Jesus, dying and rising, to take away the sins of the world.

The prophets didn't know all the answers. How could they? God didn't give them the details he's given us. He didn't tell them how long they would have to wait. But they trusted in the Savior that was coming, in his sufferings and the glories that would follow without knowing all the details. And God didn't punish them for what they didn't know. He called them to trust in what they did know. The same is true for us. There are so many questions we'd like to have answered and maybe in heaven we'll find out. But down here, our God calls us to trust what he has revealed to us. That's what the Old Testament believers did. They were saved by their faith in the coming Christ.

Was it harder for them? In a sense, I suppose it was. They had to do all that extra searching. But in another sense, it was just as easy for them as it is for us because they had the gospel. That's where faith comes from. God works through the promises that he makes when he proclaims the sufferings of Christ and the glories that follow. And it doesn't matter what form that gospel takes. God can create faith in the heart of human beings with Old Testament gospel just as easily as he can with New Testament gospel, because it's all the same message of the sufferings of Christ and the glories that will follow.

II.

In connection with all that, Peter says, "**It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.**" God takes a long view of history. God knew that Israel would exist as his chosen people for about 1500 years, but that the Christian Church would be his people for at least two thousand years. So God spoke to the Hebrew prophets in a way that fit that people, but that wasn't only for them. So that added a dimension to the prophets' striving. They were **striving to understand who they were serving.**

Peter says they knew they were serving us. That speaks to what is recorded for us. We know that prophets like Isaiah served for forty years or more, and yet, we really only have a small part of the work he did. Sixty-six chapters might seem like a lot to study, and it is. But I've only been in the ministry half that time. If you stacked all my sermons up, they'd make a much bigger pile than the pages of Isaiah's book. We don't have a single sermon Isaiah preached. We don't have his Bible classes or his confirmation class materials. We have the sixty-six chapters God chose to inspire and preserve for us.

God gave us a work that would point to Christ across seven Old Testament centuries and at least twenty New Testament centuries. How much of Isaiah's intense study of his own words did he share with the people of his time? How much of the times and circumstances did he discover and help them see? We can never know, although we do know that the believers among them waited for their Savior. The prophets were their pastors and the Old Testament believer trusted in the same Christ to pay for the same sin and get him into the same heaven that we do.

Have you ever wondered about that? Many times I've been asked what happened to the Old Testament believers. Did they go to heaven? The answer is yes. They trusted in Jesus. God the Father didn't have to wait until Jesus actually died and rose to bring them home. He knew for a fact that Jesus would pay for them. So they entered heaven at the moment that they died. They had the same faith that we do because they had the same gospel that we do.

That miracle only underlines what God has done for us. Peter says that what the prophets foretold is the gospel that has been preached to us through the Holy Spirit today. God sent the Holy Spirit into his Word. God sends the Holy Spirit through the ministry of the pastors and teachers he calls to serve his Church. God sends

the Holy Spirit every time you gather as a family to meditate on what Christ has done for you. And God reaches into our hearts to create and to strengthen our faith. If he could do that with those Old Testament prophecies and all their difficult language and limited details, what can God do with the New Testament revelation of the life of Christ? If he could do that when he was making a promise, what can he do now that the promise has been kept?

My friends, we have God working for us. God who reached into this world to give us his Son. God who saw all that we would ever be guilty of before he ever created the world and who asked his Son to become man, to live in our place, to die for our sin, and to rise and set us free. God who ordered all of history so that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem, just like he promised, of the house and line of David, just like he promised. God promised that the Savior would teach and preach and do miracles and Jesus did. He promised that the Holy Spirit would be on him and he was. He promised that he would ride into Jerusalem and that he would die a horrible death in our place and that he would rise and live. God has kept all of those promises. Because he has, all that we are guilty of is gone forever, all that we have to fear in life and in death is defeated, all the spiritual danger that stands in our way is swept aside. We will rise and live with Christ just like he still promises.

The prophets of old had to search the Scriptures to see Christ. And while the message is clearer and the details are sharper for us, we, too, still need to strive to understand all that God has done for us and all that he will do for us. The more we discover Jesus in the Old Testament and the New, the more it whets our appetite to discover even more. What was it like to be an Old Testament believer? I don't know if we can ever recreate their experience. But they had the gospel. They had the power of God. They had the promise of a Savior. We have the fulfillment in Christ. Strive to understand God's love for you in Jesus. Amen.