

***“The Least of These”:* Ministering to Those in Need**

The Cry of the Prophets

Lesson #5 for August 3, 2019

Scriptures: 1 Samuel 8:10-18; Amos 5:10-15; Micah 6:6-8; Genesis 19:1-13; Ezekiel 16:49; Isaiah 1:15-23.

1. In this lesson we will look at some of the most important messages from Old Testament prophets. We will look at Amos, Micah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah. Those Old Testament prophets spoke out boldly against kings, the rich, and those who exercised power over others. They were struck with grief, anger, and outrage; sometimes, they even acted out their messages. They could not be ignored.
2. How would you compare Ellen White’s role in our church with the roles of these Old Testament prophets? How would it make you feel to have someone in your church that was receiving documented instructions and reproofs from God, especially if they were directed at you and pointed out your sins? She sent them directly to the people she was correcting.
3. It is a well-known fact that throughout their history, the children of Israel were attracted by the religions and practices of the nations around them. The prophets we will study in this lesson had the very thankless task of trying to get people to realize what they were doing to themselves. They kept calling for people to come back to the way of God and, thus, to enjoy His benefits.
4. What do you think was so attractive about those pagan gods? Did they ever get any evidence from anywhere that those gods could do anything for them? **What evidence do we have that God is real, loves us, and is willing to work with us? We know that two of the main attractions of those ancient pagan temples were alcohol and sex. How does that compare to our modern addictions to professional sports, television, and movies?** People love fantasies!
5. In the times of ancient Israel, one of the easiest ways for people to “get ahead” in life was to oppress the people around them. The poor, the needy, the widow, the orphan, and the helpless were abused. That is not to suggest that those sins were worse than worshiping idols and practicing false religions; however, we must not forget the less fortunate in our society today.
6. In our complicated government systems of today where there are government agencies to deal with different problems, what should be our individual responsibilities?
7. There is no question about the fact that God had set out for the children of Israel a very clear plan. They rarely lived up to their calling. In the days of the judges—in the times of Samuel, the prophet—the people asked for a king so they could be like the nations around them. (1 Samuel 8:5)
8. It is true that Samuel’s sons were terrible examples and worthless leaders. Is that the real reason that the people asked for a king? Or, did they just want a king, and Samuel’s sons were a good excuse?
9. Read 1 Samuel 8:10-18. With the help of God, Samuel clearly spelled out to the children of Israel what would be the result of their choosing a king for themselves. But, they still insisted on that. So, God chose for them the kind of king they wanted—tall, good-looking, strong, and apparently a good leader.
10. For those of us who understand the great controversy setting, shouldn’t we be asking what the beings who were surrounding the throne of God (See Revelation 4-5.) and watching every move God makes said or thought when they learned about this exchange? With the guidance of God, Samuel knew that choosing a king would just be the first step in a line of evils that would beset the nation. Even at the height of the Israelite nation’s power and success, David and Solomon did not escape the temptations, corruption, and excesses connected with kingly power.
11. How much of our time and effort is spent in “keeping up with the Joneses”? How much are we influenced by society? How much are we influenced by God’s will for our lives? How much time do we spend reaching out to help the poor and needy? Should we do this as individuals? Or, as churches?
12. God’s most important means of reaching out to His people and trying to remedy the problems that were arising was through the use of prophets. He was constantly seeking to remind His nation of

what they could become if they carefully followed His will for their lives and avoided the dangers of departing from that program. Besides the kings, there were the priests. Why were prophets needed?

13. Modern Jewish leaders such as Abraham Joshua Heschel have reflected on those urgent calls for justice through the ancient prophets. These are his words:

“The things that horrified the prophets are even now daily occurrences all over the world. . . . Their breathless impatience with injustice may strike us as hysteria. We ourselves witness continually acts of injustice, manifestations of hypocrisy, falsehood, outrage, misery, but we rarely grow indignant or overly excited. To the prophets even a minor injustice assumes cosmic proportions.”—*The Prophets* (New York: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1962), pp. 3, 4.—[as quoted in *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Sunday, July 28].[‡]

14. How would you describe the words of those ancient prophets? Do they really reflect the mind and ideas of God? See Isaiah 1. How much of the words and ideas that were expressed by the prophets were impacted by the societies in which they lived? How much was directly God-given? How much are we influenced by others around us? Do we sometimes seek to be like “all the other nations” in ways that might be harmful to us and others?

15. **Amos**: Amos bore his message while Jeroboam II was king of Israel and Uzziah was king of Judah (ch 1:1). The fact that these two monarchs reigned concurrently, each as sole ruler of his realm, only between c. 767 and 753 B.C. probably limits Amos’ prophetic ministry to this brief period, and 760 may therefore be taken as an approximate date for his book.—Horn, S. H. (1979). In *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary** (p. 41). Review and Herald Publishing Association.

16. **Amos 7:14-15**:¹⁴ Amos answered, “I am not the kind of prophet who prophesies for pay. I am a herdsman, and I take care of fig trees.”¹⁵ But the LORD took me from my work as a shepherd and ordered me to come and prophesy to his people Israel.”—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Amos 7:14-15). New York: American Bible Society.

17. What did Amos mean when he said that he was not “a prophet nor the son of a prophet” or one “who prophesies for pay”? What kind of prophet prophesies for pay? What is a *prophet*? What kinds of *prophets* were popular in Israel in those days?

The prophet Amos refers to his secondary occupation as a dresser or tender of sycamores Amos 7:14; this involved slashing the fruits to induce ripening.—https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ficus_sycomorus —[retrieved on May 26, 2019].[‡]

18. Amos was a herder of sheep. But, when the dry times of the year came around and it was hard to find pasture for the sheep, there were farmers not too far away who had orchards of sycamore fig trees. These wide-spreading, shady trees provided a place where grass continued to grow and the sheep could feed. At the same time, this particular type of fig required a small slit to be made in it before it could ripen properly. There was a type of wasp that was attracted to these figs and would bite them, also accomplishing the same thing. But, often there were not enough wasps to do the job. So, while Amos’s sheep were grazing under those trees, Amos was climbing the branches and making small holes in the figs.

19. Amos was very open in admitting that he was not a “trained” prophet. Were the schools of the prophet that had been started by Samuel and built up by Elijah and Elisha still in operation in Amos’s day? Amos was apparently not trained in one of those schools.

20. Amos began his speech to the northern kingdom of Israel by attacking the nations of Syria, Philistia, Phoenicia, Edom, Ammon, and Moab. He outlined in some detail their crimes, their sins, and the terrible things they were doing, often against God’s people. (See Amos 1:3-2:3.)

21. Then, Amos moved a little closer to his audience and declared God’s judgments against the people of the southern kingdom of Judah.

22. Read Amos 2:4-5. No doubt, his audience was happy to hear about God's judgments against their neighbors and enemies. But, then Amos turned on his audience. Read Amos 3:9-11; 4:1-2; 5:10-15; and 8:4-6. These passages pointed out that many of their sins involved crimes of violence, dishonesty, as well as abuse of the weak, the poor, widows, and orphans. He even mentioned the demands by fat, well-fed women that their husbands keep them supplied with liquor!
23. Read Amos 5:10-15. They hated anyone who challenged injustice and spoke the whole truth in court. They oppressed the poor and robbed them of the grain they earned. They persecuted good people, taking bribes and preventing the poor from getting justice in court. How do you suppose it had come to that?
24. Read Amos 8:4-6. Like other prophets in the Old Testament, after giving this very powerful testimony against his audience, Amos ended his message with encouraging words from God.
- In their hour of deepest apostasy and greatest need, God's message to them was one of forgiveness and hope.—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings** 283.1.
25. Are there times when we need to speak up boldly against the wrongs that are going on in our society? Are there problems in our church that need to be spoken about?
26. In our day, so many of these issues are controlled by government. So, what could we as individuals or even as a church do about these massive problems? Should we be marching in the streets in support of justice for the oppressed? What about trying to help people living in the less-developed parts of the world?
27. **Micah:** A comparison of Mic 1:1 with Is 1:1; 6:1; and Hos 1:1 reveals that Micah's prophetic ministry began shortly after those of Isaiah and Hosea, and that for a number of years he was contemporary with them. Micah's ministry thus fell between about 739 and 686 B.C., probably during the earlier portion of this period.—Horn, S. H. In *The SDA Bible Dictionary** 735.
28. These passages clearly point out that there were several prophets prophesying at the same time, some in the northern kingdom of Israel, and some in the southern kingdom of Judah. They were busy during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. These were times of crisis.
- During the three-year siege of Samaria [capital of Israel] by the Assyrians, Shalmaneser V died and was succeeded by Sargon II of Assyria, who himself records the capture of that city thus: "Samaria I looked at, I captured; 27,280 men who dwelt in it I carried away" into Assyria. —[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingdom_of_Israel_\(Samaria\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingdom_of_Israel_(Samaria))—(accessed May 24, 2019).[‡]
29. Read Micah 6:6-8. This is one of the best-known passages in the Old Testament. So, how can we, today, do what is right, show constant love, and live in humble fellowship with our God?
30. In order to understand the context in which Micah stated these principles, we need to read Micah 2:8-11 and Micah 3:8-12. In Micah's day, people would steal the coats off someone's back, drive women from their homes, and rob children of their blessings. They wanted prophets who would go about full of lies and say: "I prophesy that wine and liquor will flow for you." (Micah 2:11, *GNB**) It was a time when:
- Micah 3:11:** The city's rulers govern for bribes, the priests interpret the Law for pay, the prophets give their revelations for money — and they all claim that the LORD is with them. "No harm will come to us," they say. "The LORD is with us."—*Good News Bible*.*
- It was during those days when Ahaz was king of Judah that the children of Israel fell to a new low in the history of their nation. Idolatry and all kinds of evil practices were common and, once again, people preyed on the poor, the helpless, the widows, and the orphans.
31. In his small book, Micah started out expressing God's anger and sorrow at the evil His people were doing. But, God was not done with them. By the time Micah reached the end of his book in Micah 7:18-22, God told Micah He would, figuratively, trample their sins underfoot and send their sins to the bottom of the sea. Of course, that is, if they would follow God.

32. What would God say to us today if He sent us an Amos? Or, a Hosea? Or, a Micah? What is the link between justice, loving mercy, and calmly walking humbly before God?
33. **Ezekiel:** A priest, the son of Buzi, born in Judah but transported to Babylonia with the group that went into captivity with Jehoiachin in 597 B.C. (Eze 1:1–3). He was then about 25 years of age if “the thirtieth year” (ch 1:1) is a reference to his age (cf. v 2).... In the 5th year of his captivity he was called to the prophetic office (Eze 1:2, 3; 2; 3), and served in this capacity for some 22 years (ch 29:17), from about 593 to 571 B.C.—Horn, S. H. In *The SDA Bible Dictionary** 353.
34. Ezekiel prophesied mostly from the territory of Babylonia after he and others had been taken into Babylonian captivity. But, he had some very strong words against the sins of the children of Israel which had resulted in God allowing them to be captured by the Babylonians.
35. Read Ezekiel 16:49. Why do you think God chose to compare the people of Judah with the people of Sodom and Samaria? Given what we know from Genesis 19:1-13, we most often think of sexual perversions when we think about the city of Sodom. But, writing many years later, Ezekiel said that one of their biggest sins was abuse of the poor and needy.
36. Why do you think Lot moved into the city of Sodom? He did not, at first, live in the city. With his enormous flocks and herds, he lived in the fertile valley of the Jordan River. He lived in tents like his uncle Abraham. But, there are hints that he married a wife from the city of Sodom. What do we know about his wife?
- The wife of Lot was a selfish, irreligious woman, and her influence was exerted to separate her husband from Abraham. But for her, Lot would not have remained in Sodom, deprived of the counsel of the wise, God-fearing patriarch. The influence of his wife and the associations of that wicked city would have led him to apostatize from God had it not been for the faithful instruction he had early received from Abraham. The marriage of Lot and his choice of Sodom for a home were the first links in a chain of events fraught with evil to the world for many generations.—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets** 174.2; CC* 48.5; CC* 57.4.
37. Ezekiel spelled out the sins of Israel in considerable detail, even claiming that they were worse than the people of Sodom! Compare Jesus’s comments about Capernaum and Bethsaida. (Matthew 11:21-24; Luke 10:13-15)
38. The book of Ezekiel ends with many long-term prophetic messages about what could happen to the children of Israel if they would simply follow God’s plan for their lives. God promised He would: 1) Bring them back, 2) Look for the lost and hurting, 3) Help those who were sick, and 4) Destroy those who claimed to be strong. God promised to be a faithful shepherd.
39. Why do you think Ezekiel gave such detail about God’s future plans for the children of Israel when He knew it would never actually happen? Read Ezekiel 47:13-48:29. Or, was he talking about the New Jerusalem? After giving all of these details about how the land would be re-divided among the faithful children of Israel all of whom were at that point in time in Babylonian captivity, Ezekiel went on to describe the future temple that was to be built in Jerusalem.
40. What does this tell us about God’s hopes for Israel? They may have fallen far away from God’s plan. As a Seventh-day Adventist Church, we should have been in the kingdom of heaven long before this. But, God still loves us.
41. **Isaiah:** Greatest of the Hebrew prophets and author of the book that bears his name. He was a son of Amoz (Is 1:1; not Amos) and came to the prophetic office toward the close of the reign of Uzziah (Azariah), c. 790–c. 739 B.C. and served also under Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (d. c. 686). Tradition makes him cousin of Uzziah.... According to tradition Isaiah fell a martyr to Hezekiah’s son, Manasseh, who abolished the reforms instituted by his father and, presumably, had the prophet sawn asunder (cf. Heb 11:37).—Horn, S. H. In *The SDA Bible Dictionary** 527.
42. Read Isaiah 1:15-23. Try to imagine yourself as a young prophet giving your first sermon to the people of Israel who were in open rebellion against God and saying they were like the leaders of Sodom and Gomorrah. He went on to talk about how God would not even listen to their prayers

unless they turned back and obeyed Him and did what was right. He described their leaders as rebels and friends of those accepting gifts and bribes, never defending orphans in court or listening when widows presented their cases. They plundered vineyards, filling their houses with what they had stolen from the poor. How would you like to live under those circumstances?

43. Read Isaiah 5:7-8. They even committed murder. Their victims were constantly crying out for justice. Isaiah made it very clear how serious their rejection of God had become. He is known as *the gospel prophet*. And he had wonderful promises to those who come back to God; but, he had terrible denunciations for those who continue in rebellion. He mourned about the terrible conditions existing in his day in the country of Judah.
44. Read Isaiah 58 and 59. There is a loud cry for justice. He stated clearly that justice is driven back and righteousness stands at a distance, truth is trampled in the streets, and honesty cannot enter. Do we have any of those kinds of conditions in our world today? But yet, he offered marvelous promises to God's people if they would return to Him.
45. Read Isaiah 9:6-7; 11:1-5; 42:1-7; and 53:4-6. These passages provide a popular prophecy of the results of the arrival of the true Messiah, the true Descendant of David who would bring justice to the universe.
46. Isaiah 53 is very often quoted as being, perhaps, the best prophecy in the Old Testament regarding the life of Jesus. Why do you suppose that right in the middle that prophecy it says: "All the while we **thought** that his suffering was punishment sent by God"? (Isaiah 53:4, *GNB**†) Do any Christians today teach that Jesus died under the retributive justice sent by God?
47. Ellen White had very strong words about the material that we are covering in this lesson. See *Prophets and Kings* 282.1; 306-307; 327 as quoted in *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Friday, August 2.
48. If you mention prophecy or a prophet to a Christian in our day, he usually thinks of someone who foretells the future. But, as we have noted in this lesson, much of a prophet's work was crying out against the abuses going on in his own society.
49. Ellen White also "prophesied" in that same manner. Only a small part of what she said/wrote was in the form of predicting the future. By far, the majority of what she wrote was about correcting our errors and instructing us in righteousness.
50. But, prophesying in this manner can be a dangerous undertaking. Isaiah was sawn in half by Manasseh for his statements against that wicked king.
51. Ellen White was sent to Australia to get her out of the way. But, what she wrote from Australia was some of the most powerful material of her lifetime and also some of the most damning of the church's leadership. (See *1SM* 233-235.)
52. In all of these writings, we have noticed that God through His prophets alternated between damning condemnations and deep loving concern for His people. How do we fit those two aspects together? Aren't those the responses of Someone who really loves someone while watching them going in the wrong direction?
53. Try to imagine yourself living and acting as one of those Old Testament prophets. How do you think you would survive? Would you dare to speak out as they did? What are we doing today to call our church and ourselves back to God's ideal for our lives? Are we really preparing a people for the second coming of Jesus Christ? It is clear that these Old Testament prophets saw themselves as watchmen on the walls of Zion, trying to warn people about the dangers ahead. Do we have a similar responsibility today. See Ezekiel 3:17-19.
54. So, what have you learned from:
 - (1) the shepherd-prophet Amos, who calls his people to justice and righteousness;
 - (2) Micah, whose message to Ahaz is given during a time when the kingdom reaches an all-time low in justice;
 - (3) Ezekiel, who speaks to the exiles in Babylon;
 - and (4) Isaiah, who calls God's people to live out the Messianic hope for a just nation. Where are the voices calling for justice and mercy today?—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 65.

Do we have any *Amoses*, any *Micahs*, any *Ezekiels*, any *Isaiahs* in the church today? These prophets were calling out to governments and peoples who at least claimed to be the people of God. How many people in our day even claim to be the people of God?

55. In the history of the United States of America, probably the greatest injustice was the period of slavery. Ellen White took a significant role in the church's action toward the *black work* as it was called. Her son and daughter-in-law worked there for many years. She sent a very strong message to the General Conference meeting in Battle Creek, Michigan in 1892, telling them that they must not any longer neglect the *black work*. She knew that this would lead us and bring her into conflict with some in the church leadership. She did not look forward to that conflict; but, she refused to live as a coward. Are we living as cowards today by not speaking out about social injustice?
56. It is clear from this lesson that God's love is other-directed. That is, God is asking us constantly to reach out to those who are in most need. What are we doing to accomplish that?
57. Read Jeremiah 22:1-3,13-17. Compare the following passage from President Jan Paulson.

"There is a vast difference between seeking a voice in the public discourse, and seeking to wield political power. As a church—and individuals—we have not only the right but the obligation, to be a moral voice in society; to speak clearly and eloquently on that which touches our values. **Human rights, religious freedom, public health, poverty, and injustice**—these are some of the areas in which we have a God-given responsibility to advocate for those who cannot speak for themselves."—Jan Paulsen, "Serving Our World, Serving Our Lord," *Adventist World, NAD Edition* (May 2007), pp. 9, 10.—[as quoted in *Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 66].^{†‡}

58. Read again Amos 5:21-24; Isaiah 61:8; Jeremiah 9:24; and Micah 6:1-8. Compare 1 Samuel 15:22.
59. God had done everything He could to try to lead His people in the right direction. We know what happened. Read Deuteronomy 10:12-19; compare Matthew 22:37-39.
60. Ellen White also had some very strong words about the problems in the days of Jesus. See *The Desire of Ages* 396.
61. Read Ezekiel 16:49-52. Is it really possible that the sins of Judah and Jerusalem where Solomon's Temple was located and people claimed to be worshiping the true God were actually worse than the sins of Sodom and of Samaria the capital of the northern kingdom which had already gone into Assyrian captivity?
62. Often, we suggest that the worst sins are sins of commission; but, what about sins of omission? Read James 4:17; compare Matthew 25:41-46; and Isaiah 59:2-4,8-9,14-16.
63. In conclusion, read the following words from Ellen White.

There is a cause for the moral paralysis upon society. Our laws sustain an evil which is sapping their very foundations. Many deplore the wrongs which they know exist, but consider themselves free from all responsibility in the matter. This cannot be. Every individual exerts an influence in society. In our favored land, every voter has some voice in determining what laws shall control the nation. Should not that influence and that vote be cast on the side of temperance and virtue?—Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*,* November 8, 1881, par. 9; *Ibid*.* October 15, 1914, par. 21; *GW** 387.1; *PH136** 13.4; *PH093** 8.2.

64. As a church, we have tended to focus on the second coming of Jesus and are charged to prepare the world for that event. But, what are we doing about the social injustices affecting those right around us? Read Matthew 5:7-48; 22:35-40; and Luke 10:27.
65. What should be the relationship between our preparing the world for the second coming of Jesus and our dealing with the many evils and social injustices in the world around us?

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