

The Prayers of the Prophets

You will say in that day: "I will give thanks to thee, O LORD,
for though thou wast angry with me,
thy anger turned away,
and thou didst comfort me.
"Behold, God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid;
for the LORD GOD is my strength and my song,
and he has become my salvation."
With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.
And you will say in that day: "Give thanks to the LORD,
call upon his name;
make known his deeds among the nations,
proclaim that his name is exalted.
"Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously;
let this be known in all the earth.

Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel."

Isaiah 12:1-6

O LORD, thou hast deceived me,
and I was deceived;
thou art stronger than I,
and thou hast prevailed.
I have become a laughingstock all the day;
every one mocks me.
For whenever I speak, I cry out,
I shout, "Violence and destruction!"
For the word of the LORD has become for me
a reproach and derision all day long.
If I say, "I will not mention him,
or speak any more in his name,"
there is in my heart as it were a burning fire
shut up in my bones,
and I am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot.

Jeremiah 20:7-9

Though the fig tree do not blossom,
nor fruit be on the vines,
the produce of the olive fail
and the fields yield no food,
the flock be cut off from the fold
and there be no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
I will joy in the God of my salvation.

GOD, the Lord, is my strength;
he makes my feet like hinds' feet,
he makes me tread upon my high places.

Habbakuk 3:17-19

Three simple points, I hope, about the prayers of the prophets. They are, of course, far too many to discuss or even to numerate. They reflect one thousand years worth of Hebrew reflection upon the mystery of God, and they present that reflection in the context of the evolving history of Israel, the events of which are mirrors, for the prophets, held up to the relationship between God and his people.

First of all, Isaiah of Jerusalem, a Judean seer and poet in the eighth century BC. Though he is a prophet of warning – the political machinations of his kingdom, and the localised oppression of God's people, are tending the land towards destruction. Assyria is on the march, as the vehicle of the Lord's wrath. The Lord himself, however, is first and foremost the saviour of his people.

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The presence of God in and among his people is a saving presence. The Lord – Yahweh – is not simply the hope for future salvation, but the source of present salvation, the great one whose deeds are to be made known not just in Israel and Judah but in all the nations. And this is so because the source of salvation is in fact the source of all things. The Lord, the God of Israel, is the Lord of all nations because he is the maker of the heavens and the earth. As for the Gods of the heathen, they are but idols.

However, the heathen themselves, as the pawns of the creator, can be the vehicles of his judgement. Jeremiah's calling is to speak the unpalatable truth, that the people of Jerusalem and Judah have abandoned the ways of the Lord, and that judgement – in the form of the Babylonian empire – is about to take its toll. Jeremiah himself is of course the messenger whom one loves to shoot. His calling is a calling to persecution and suffering, and the people to whom he is sent refuse to hear the word of truth which he speaks. Thus it is that he cries out in lament:

O LORD, thou hast deceived me,
and I was deceived;
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and thou hast prevailed.
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This bewailing of his situation is just as important a prayer as Isaiah's praise of his saviour, because it reflects another essential characteristic of the Hebrew prophets – their intimate relationship with the God of Israel. When Elijah receives the still, small voice, the content of the message is far from gentle – it is an instruction to take decisive and violent action against the followers of Baal. The still small voice speaks of intimacy, of closeness, rather than cuddly softness. Jeremiah's relationship with the Lord is one which is closer than that of parent to child – the Lord called him from his mother's womb. Frequently he cries out in anguish, frequently the Lord interrupts to instruct him afresh. Here, towards the end of Jeremiah 20, the Lord does not speak. Jeremiah's anguish is allowed to stand, because it is part of the truth which he tells. Violence and destruction – the media of God's judgement – are on their way, and Jeremiah stands in their midst as the bearer of uncomfortable truth, the faithful but frustrated one who is blessed with the vision of what is to come but powerless to prevent it. His misery is the product of his heart, and hence it is the truest form of prayer.

Salvation, creation, judgement, honesty. These characteristics give us an insight into the prayers of the prophets, but at the root of them all is faithful trust. The prophets are called to do and to say bizarre things, to conduct what look like strange experiments as signs, to challenge the people who have power of earthly life and death. Their mission is made possible by trust in the saving power of the one who made heaven and earth. Habbakuk's book begins with a question: "How long O Lord shall I cry for help?" The answer is found not in intellect nor in enquiry, but in relationship a relationship of trust in the Lord who made and called him. It is a model of prayer for us all.

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