

THE BIG PICTURE  
WISE LIVING, TRUE WORSHIP

Have you ever heard just one side of a conversation? Perhaps someone is on the phone in the room, at work or at home; you hear what is being said in the room, but you never hear the other side. It can be quite bizarre: you hear some strange answers and are left wondering what on earth the questions have been. Or all you hear are words 'yes' and 'no'; it must be a very one-sided conversation! On the other hand, the part of the conversation that you do hear is very strong and strident, someone is saying some hugely painful or controversial things and you are left wondering what the person on the other end of the phone is thinking and feeling when they're being spoken to in that way. You find yourself making up the other side of the conversation, imagining what the other person is saying, especially if the person in room is reacting badly, or violently, or is laughing fit to burst.

In our 8-week journey through the whole Bible, we come today to what is two sides of a conversation; we don't always understand that, but this Big Picture look at the Bible allows us to see this quite clearly. We're going to look today at the Old Testament prophets and the book of Psalms – two sides of a conversation between God and His people. God speaks and the people respond; God says some comforting and challenging things and the people respond in worship and in prayer and by living life in good and wise and right way, perhaps! The problem: sometimes that conversation has been one-sided; God has spoken, but His people have either been deaf or have just ignored Him, selective deafness I think it is called! There is a huge danger here that individually we don't listen to God, or as a congregation, or a Church we've stopped listening to pursue a political agenda that we want to follow, or to do our own thing, or because we simply want to stick with traditions; so we stop listening to God. The beauty of God is that He has kept speaking; there were times when it seemed as if God had gone away, but He hadn't really; He kept speaking, He kept looking for people to respond; the Spirit is still at work; the Bible is still there; God is still speaking.

The story so far – we began in Genesis with the creation of everything; God made all that is and the climax of creation is in giving us the gift of life; people are made bearing the image of God, to love and be loved, able to make reasoned, moral choices; all was very good. Then it went bad, sin came into the world through the bad choices made by Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden; since then the world has been living in tension between this good world and bad world. We saw that in the lives of Abraham and Moses and we saw it last time in the Kings: David and Solomon were the best of times for Israel, but there were the worst of times when other kings lost their love for God, and their devotion, faith drifted off and they led the people off with them. God was with them and everything was sweet for a time, but they began to forget; other ways seemed more enticing, more exciting, perhaps and they lost their love for God.

Alongside all of these good and bad kings, alongside the rise and fall of Israel, God sends prophets, men like Jeremiah; God speaks to His people. We read the story of Jeremiah's call to be a prophet, and whilst they are all different, there are certain things that are same for all of the prophets. Here are four of them:

- **They have a particular time in the history of God's people:** Jeremiah can tell us exactly when God called him to be a prophet and when he exercised his ministry. His ministry was for a particular time and place in the history of God's people; the people were at a turning point in their history and had certain big choices to make and Jeremiah was sent by God to help them make right choices; actually

from the king downwards they chose not to listen to Jeremiah and so they made the wrong choices.

- **God speaks through the prophet:** *“Ah, sovereign...” (1:6ff)* Jeremiah is very aware of his youth; he’s ‘only a boy’ his enemies said to start off. God equips him to deal with these taunts by telling him very clearly that words he speaks are God’s words; “Say whatever I command you”. This is not Jeremiah’s own making, but he is inspired by the Spirit of God. God speaks.
- **God’s word addresses the time and circumstances:** *“Then the...” (1:9f)* Much of Jeremiah’s ministry was about how to cope with the present crisis: either to resist the menace that was Nebuchadnezzar and create alliance with Egypt; or to give in and submit to Nebuchadnezzar and work with him? God’s will for His people was to submit, not to rebel and Jeremiah preached that message over and over again. It would be better for them in the long term. The people didn’t listen! Nebuchadnezzar destroyed them and their city and took them into exile.
- **They speak in pictures:** *“The word...” (1:11f)* Here is a play on words: the word for ‘almond’ sounds like the word for ‘watching’, so the picture of the almond tree is given as symbol of God watching His people, to care for them. Some of the prophets not only spoke in pictures; some of them even acted out their message so that people saw as well as heard the word of the Lord.

God speaks through Jeremiah; He speaks His word to guide and lead them; do they listen? No! The people wandered off they lost their faith, they lost their devotion to God and lived in ways that were wrong; they became corrupt, they treated one another badly, they neglected the poor, they worshipped idols made of stone and wood. God sent the prophets to do two things: first of all, they were sent to point out to the people the error of their ways, to show them where they’d gone wrong and the consequences of their waywardness; sometimes these were words of judgement and that could be painful and led to the prophets being persecuted and sometimes killed for their troubles; Jeremiah was thrown down a dried-up well for telling people what they didn’t want to hear. Secondly, the prophets were sent to call the people back to their first love, their love for God; some of the most intimate expressions of God’s love for His people are in the writings of the prophets as God tries to win the battle for the hearts and minds of His people. God speaks to His people to tell them that He loves them and to draw them back to love Him above all others. This is one side of the conversation!

What do you say back to God? For 3000 years the Psalms have given voice to our side of conversation. We chose to sing versions of two Psalms today and I deliberately chose modern versions because the Psalms are still inspiring people to sing them in praise to God. For these 3000 years, the Psalms have given voice to a whole range of emotions and have allowed God’s people to say a whole range of things to Him. They are the people of God at their best in this conversation:

- **Worship:** some Psalms are pure songs of joy and praise, simply rejoicing in the greatness and majesty of God, or in His endless love; and they invite the people of God to praise Him for all that He is and all that He has done. So we say ‘thank you’ to God for all His goodness and grace, for His power and strength at work in the world. Psalm 103 would be a good example of that in its best known form ‘Praise my soul the King of Heaven’.
- **Faith:** Psalm 23 is a profound expression of faith; God provides everything that we need and so we can trust in Him and Psalm 23 expresses that sense of trust in the God who loves us endlessly and provides for us tirelessly. Psalm 63 expresses that faith in different circumstances; here the man of faith is feeling weak and is longing for God to help him; he is lying awake at night, wondering when that help and strength will come, but yet confident that God will help him.

- **Anger:** there are real feelings of complaint at times in the Psalms, that God hasn't done what He said He would do, or that God has abandoned His people and left them helpless; 'how long', says Psalm 13, will it be before see the grace and power of God, how long before know His forgiving love all over again? The Psalmist simply gives vent to his feelings. Psalm 137, that we studied last Wednesday with Pete Chirnside and is written in exile in Babylon, gives a real feeling of a people being abandoned by God; they think God is not there any more and they are tormented and oppressed and want revenge on their oppressors.
- **Repentance:** The word hits home; the people recognise their faults and mistakes and so they come to God to say 'sorry'; Psalm 51 is a prime example of a man acknowledging his mistakes and asking God to forgive him. It takes a humble person to do this, but sometimes being humble is our biggest achievement.

We speak to God and the Psalms give us a voice when we're not sure what to say. Prayer is part of our speaking to God; we can say what we like and we speak with humble, grateful hearts.

That two-way conversation is our relationship with God at its best. God still speaks; that's why it is so important that we read the Bible, because for us now this is way God speaks to us most clearly. Have ever read Bible passage and it talks to you about your situation that very day? Have you ever sat listening to a sermon and thought 'this is just for me'? If you have (and I know you have because you've told me!), then that is the Spirit of God speaking to our hearts. God speaks and we have to listen, to take to heart what we read and learn from it. Sadly only 10% of Christians in Scotland today read the Bible; that means that there is a huge number of Christians who are not listening to God's side of conversation, who don't know what He wants of us. I know that many of you who are reading the E-100 challenge passages are finding hugely to your benefit; for those for whom this is a new thing, the challenge is to keep reading after E-100 is done! We read the Bible and listen to God's side of the conversation.

We speak to God. Worship is given to God; what we do on Sunday is not done just to cheer ourselves up or make us feel good; we offer this to God, to tell Him how great we think He is, to thank Him for His love, to pledge our allegiance all over again. Prayer is such an important part of our side of conversation: we can express anything in our prayer: worship and thanksgiving, love and devotion, faith and trust, complaint and anger, repentance; we express all of these emotions and more in our prayers and God will listen and hear us. Sometimes we shy away from prayer because we're not sure how to put what we think and feel into words; well, use the Psalms; why not allow the Psalms to put into words what you think and feel; try it for a time and it might just work for you.

A one-sided conversation? Is God speaking but we're not listening? The challenge for us is to read the Bible, listen for the Spirit and shape our lives by what we hear. The one-sided conversation never happens the other way round because God always listens to us; He hears us when we speak, He delights in our worship, He answers our prayers. What is the best result of this conversation? That we listen and take to heart what God says to us in Bible and that we live it out; the best result of this conversation is that we are the kind of people God wants us to be. "*He has...*" (*Micah 6:8*)- that is the best end to this two-way conversation that I know!