

THE PERIL OF IGNORING THE WARNING SIGNS

Presented by
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As I begin this sermon today, I would like to ask you to think for just a moment about one of your past out-of-town trips—whether it was just a daytime trip to a nearby city that took only a few hours, or whether it was a vacation-type trip that took several days. I would like you to consider the following scenario. You are driving down the Interstate in a leisurely fashion when suddenly you see a bright-orange, diamond-shaped warning sign that says in huge black letters,

“CAUTION! BE PREPARED TO STOP! WORK CREWS PRESENT!”

You see the sign, and you have no trouble whatsoever reading it. You also understand quite clearly what it means. Workmen are nearby, and for their safety, you need to slow down and be prepared to stop. Yet in spite of the fact that you saw the sign, were able to read the words on the sign, and understood the message behind the sign, you nevertheless continued driving at the same 70-miles-per-hour speed that you had been driving before you saw the sign. A minute or two later, a workman wearing a bright-yellow vest sees you approaching at that speed, and immediately starts waving a large red flag to alert you to the fact that you need to slow down. You see the flag, and you understand the worker’s message. Yet you still continue on at the same 70-miles-per-hour speed that you had been driving before you saw the flagman. Less than a minute later, your car plows into a group of workers on the highway, killing two of them instantly, and seriously injuring three more of them.

Or, consider the following possible scenario. You are an avid reader who constantly is digesting written materials from all sorts of sources such as books, magazines, or items on the Internet. One of your favorite subjects is information about how to stay healthy. During your readings, on several different occasions you learn from a wide variety of reputable sources that one of the symptoms of lung cancer is blood in a person’s sputum. One day you are working in the yard, and the dust around you caused you to get choked. You cough, and then spit—only to notice that there is blood in your sputum. A few days later, you are typing at your computer when you realize that you are about to cough, which causes you to automatically put your hand up to your mouth. As you cough, you see bright-red droplets of blood splatter across your fingers. A few days later you are watching television, and you feel a tickle in your throat. You grab a Kleenex to smother the cough that you know is coming, but you notice afterwards that the Kleenex contains rather copious amounts of blood. For your part, however, you simply ignore these events and act as nothing out of the ordinary has happened. Six months later your doctor diagnoses you with incurable lung cancer, and says to you, “You have less than three months left to live. If only you had come to me six months earlier, we could have treated this disease and cured it.” Weeks later, you die from lung cancer.

Now, with both of those scenarios fresh in your mind, I would like to ask you a couple of questions. First, whose fault was it that you plowed into the group of workmen, killing two of them and seriously injuring three others? Second, whose fault was it that you ended up dying of lung cancer? If you are honest with yourself, you will have to admit: **It was your own fault!**

But there are two other equally important questions that need to be asked: Why did the workmen die? And why did you die of lung cancer? The answer to both of those questions is the same: The workmen died, and you died, **because you ignored the warning signs!**

Now, you may be asking yourselves right about now: “What does all of this have to do with a Bible-based sermon?” I’m glad you asked. Let me elaborate—and I think my point will become quite clear.

In our Sunday-afternoon “All about the Bible” class, we recently began studying some of the Old Testament prophets. If you were to combine the Major Prophets and the Minor Prophets, the total number would be 16. And that does not even take into account the numerous other prophets mentioned in the Old Testament who did not have books named after them, yet who nevertheless were still very important—people like Elijah, Elisha, Ahijah, Micaiah, and various others. If we were to count all of the prophets mentioned in the Old Testament—both named and unnamed—the number would be considerable.

But why did God send all those prophets? What was their purpose? Prophets basically had two jobs. First, on occasion they were sent by God to predict various events that would take place at some point down the road. In other words, they **foretold** the future. Second, and much more frequently, the prophets were instructed by God to tell His people important things that they needed to hear so that they could obey the Lord. In other words, the prophets **told forth** God’s Word. If we were to summarize the basic work of all the prophets whom God sent to the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, such a summary might go something like this: God’s prophets were sent to provide warning signs to the people of Israel and Judah regarding very real dangers that lay ahead—in an attempt to stave off those dangers and to bring the people back to a humble, sincere obedience to God.

But, just as sadness, sorrow, and death resulted because you ignored the warning signs mentioned in the two examples at the beginning of this sermon, so sadness, sorrow, and death resulted when the people of Israel and Judah ignored the warning signs that God had set before them through His servants the prophets.

Sometimes the warning signs given by the prophets dealt with a single individual. And when that individual ignored those warning signs, he often paid with his life (and sometimes even with the lives of his family members). One prominent example of just such an individual is the wicked king Ahab of Israel. Ahab had joined forces with Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, to fight against Syria. From 1 Kings 22 we learn that before going into battle, Jehoshaphat (who, by the way, was a good king) decided to ask, “Is there not a prophet of the Lord here so that we may inquire of Him?” (verse 7). Sure enough, there **was** a prophet

of the Lord available. His name was Micaiah. And his prophecy on that occasion was that if Ahab went into battle, he would die. King Ahab did not like Micaiah's prophecy, and as a result, one of the king's servants struck the prophet on the face and mocked him—after which Ahab ordered Micaiah to be placed in prison. King Ahab—ignoring Micaiah's warning signs—hastily drove his chariot into battle, and ended up being slain by an arrow shot blindly by an unknown Syrian warrior. Ahab apparently did not take seriously the peril of ignoring God's warning signs—and paid for his arrogance and insolence with his life.

At other times, the warning signs given by the prophets dealt with entire nations. And when those nations ignored those warning signs, they suffered complete and total annihilation and extinction—or were hauled into exile for years and years and years. Several examples come to mind.

Obadiah was the very first prophet to arrive on the scene in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Interestingly enough, however, his prophecy was not aimed at Judah, but at Edom. In fact, the entire book of Obadiah is a prophecy against Edom. In verses 15 and 16 of his lone biblical chapter, Obadiah prophesied concern Edom:

“Edom, as you have done, it shall be done to you;
Your reprisal shall return upon your own head....
Edom...shall be as though it had never been.”

The Edomites had refused to allow the Israelites permission to cross through their land during the Exodus from Egypt (Numbers 20:14-21). As a result, many years later during the Israelites' journey northward to the plains of Moab across from Jericho (Numbers 33:48-49), the prophet Balaam prophesied on God's behalf that Israel would one day possess Edom (Numbers 24:18). Many years later the Edomites would add insult to injury in regard to their treatment of the Israelites by joining the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar when he besieged Jerusalem to destroy it. For their cruelty at that particular time, they were strongly denounced by the later prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah (Isaiah 34:5-8; 63:1-4; Jeremiah 49:17). After the destruction of Jerusalem, the Edomites settled in southern Palestine, and prospered for several centuries. However, during the later rule of the Maccabees, the Edomites were completely subdued, and were forced to conform to Jewish laws and religious rites, just as Balaam had prophesied. The Edomites thus ended up being absorbed into the Jewish nation, and, just as Obadiah had predicted, became “as though they had never been.”

Other prophets sent by God, however, presented warning signs for the people of Israel and Judah. Amos and Hosea were two prophets who spoke specifically to the Northern Kingdom, repeatedly warning the Israelites about their impending doom at the hand of the powerful Assyrian Empire if they did not repent. The second chapter of Amos presents various transgressions of Israel, while the third chapter of Amos' book predicts Israel's annihilation at the hand of the Assyrians. Amos even went so far as to say that “an adversary shall be all around the land; he shall sap your strength from you, and your palaces shall be plundered. As a shepherd takes from the mouth of a lion two legs or a piece of an ear, so shall the chil-

dren of Israel be taken out who dwell in Samaria” (Amos 3:11-12). Hosea was even more specific when he said, “Israel is swallowed up; now they are among the Gentiles like a vessel in which is no pleasure.... The Assyrian shall be his king because they refused to repent” (Hosea 8:8; 11:5). Just as Amos and Hosea had prophesied, in 722 B.C. the Assyrian king Sargon II carried the people of Samaria away into captivity, and they were never heard from again.

God sent even **more** prophets—**13 in all!**—to the Southern Kingdom of Judah with a message that was hardly any less depressing than the one that Amos and Hosea presented to the people of Israel. Those faithful prophets desperately tried to warn the people of Judah that the powerful Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar was crouched at their doorstep, preparing to carry them into exile. Joel preached that “the day of the Lord is at hand, and shall come as destruction from the Almighty” (Joel 1:15), while the prophet Jeremiah said on God’s behalf, “I will give all Judah into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall carry them captive to Babylon and slay them with the sword” (Jeremiah 20:4). The prophet Isaiah referred to the coming Babylonian exile with such absolute certainty that in his book he even referred to it as something **that had already taken place!** Speaking for God, Isaiah wrote, “My people **have gone** into captivity” (Isaiah 5:13). Sure enough, just as God’s prophets had predicted, in 586 B.C. King Nebuchadnezzar attached Jerusalem, tore down its walls, killed many of its inhabitants, and destroyed the beautiful temple of Solomon that had stood for 474 years. He then carried the people of Judah into Babylonian exile, exactly as Jeremiah had prophesied.

The inhabitants of Israel and Judah **repeatedly** and **continually** spurned the message that God sent them through His prophets. By acting in such a fashion, they failed to realize the peril of ignoring God’s warning signs. And look what happened as a result!

What is the moral of this story for those of us in the twenty-first century? Surely by now that moral is crystal clear. The overall thrust of the Old Testament prophets’ message was this: “**Repent or perish!**” And what is the thrust of the message from the New Testament for us today? Jesus taught while He was on Earth, “Unless you repent, you will all perish” (Luke 13:5). And His disciples taught exactly the same thing after Christ had ascended back into heaven. In his powerful speech presented to the people of Athens on Mars Hill, the apostle Paul said, “Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man, Jesus Christ” (Acts 17:30). The question is: Will we, like the people of Israel and Judah, fail to heed the warning signs that God has given us? I can guarantee you that **if we do, we will do so at our own peril.**