

He Gave Us Prophets

LESSON
ONE

ESSENTIAL
HERMENEUTICAL
PERSPECTIVES



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He Gave Us Prophets

Lesson One

Essential Hermeneutical Perspectives

INTRODUCTION

I have a friend who once told me, “Richard, if you want a big church, all you have to do is throw a Bible prophecy conference and tell everyone that Jesus is coming back very soon.” And as I take a look at Christian bookstores and Christian television, I’m convinced he’s right. Lots of people are excited about prophecy because they’re convinced that the prophets of old tell them that Jesus is coming back very soon.

Most Christians pay little attention to Old Testament prophecy, but when they do their thoughts run immediately to things like the second coming of Christ and other end-of-the-world events. Christian leaders of many different denominations encourage people to look for these themes on every page of the prophetic writings. Although our minds almost naturally run to these themes, in these lessons we’re going to take a much more sober approach to Old Testament prophecy — the approach that the prophets themselves took. And as we do, we’ll discover that the prophets had much, much more to say than we can possibly imagine.

We have entitled this lesson “Essential Hermeneutical Perspectives” because we’ll identify the hermeneutical or interpretative considerations which we must all grasp if we’re going to handle biblical prophecy responsibly. This opening lesson will divide into four parts: our confusion about Old Testament prophecy, and then we’ll look at three topics that will help us overcome this confusion — the nature of a prophet’s experience, the importance of finding the original meaning, and finally, New Testament perspectives on Old Testament prophecy. Let’s take a look first at our confusion.

OUR CONFUSION

Have you ever noticed how most Christians know some parts of the Bible better than they know others? In the Old Testament, the stories of the Pentateuch are very familiar. Motivated Bible readers know Joshua and Judges, and a few believers even understand a lot about books like Samuel and Kings and Chronicles. But as soon as someone asks, “What is Isaiah about?” or “How about that Zephaniah?” “Isn’t Haggai a thrilling book?” well, we’re left dumbfounded because we know so little about these books. Even pastors and other Christian teachers tend to avoid careful explanations about Old Testament prophets because they’re so confused about this part of the Bible.

As we begin this study of Old Testament prophecy, it’s important that we start with a look at our confusion. We’ll ask two basic questions: what are the sources of our confusion, and what are some of the results of this confusion? Let’s begin with a look at the sources of confusion that so many of us feel about Old Testament prophecy.

SOURCES OF CONFUSION

There are at least two things that cause many Christians to have problems with this part of Scripture. First, the prophetic books themselves, and second, disharmony in the church.

Prophetic Books

Let's face it, the books of prophecy contained in Scripture are probably the most difficult parts of the Bible to grasp. Most Christians have a hard time even pronouncing the names of some prophets, much less understanding what they said. We're frequently perplexed by the contents of their books. They seem disjointed; one verse doesn't seem to lead to the next. And prophets seem to talk in riddles and in puzzles, and sometimes their words just don't make sense to us at all.

And if this weren't enough, we don't know much about the historical events of this period of the Bible. The kings, the nations, the wars and other events are so complex that we have a hard time keeping our bearings. When most Christians read Old Testament prophets, they feel as if they've entered into a very strange, foreign land. The street signs don't make sense. The customs are bizarre. And we walk around bewildered because of the difficulties that the prophetic books themselves present.

The Church

There's a second major source of our confusion: the church. The Christian church has wonderful harmony of teaching in so many areas. But, when it comes to interpreting Old Testament prophecy, there is hardly any harmony at all, only disagreement. You've heard the debates — what are you? A premillennial dispensationalist? Do you believe in pre-tribulation rapture or mid-tribulation rapture or post-tribulation rapture? How about becoming a postmillennialist or a historical premillennialist? Or are you a pessimistic or optimistic amillennialist? We go to one denomination and hear that everyone else is wrong. Then we go to another group and hear just the opposite. Although evangelicals agree on the essentials of the faith, there is hardly any agreement among us when it comes to prophecy. The church has been so divided about the interpretation of the prophets that it is difficult for us to come to these texts with much confidence at all.

RESULTS OF CONFUSION

This deep confusion we feel has led to some regrettable results. I can think of at least two major results from the confusion that we have over of this part of the Bible: victimization and apathy.

Victimization

Victimization happens all around us. There's so much disagreement and confusion that so-called "prophecy experts" rise to bring order to the confusion. They do this by going around and teaching their opinions, as if they were absolutely certain.

Several examples of victimization like this come to my mind. In recent decades, countless books and teachers have said that the establishment of Israel in 1948 marked the last generation before Christ's return. It used to be taught widely that Christ had to return within one forty-year generation after 1948 — "Only one generation after Israel returns to the land, the Bible says forty years, and Christ will come back for his church."

Well, forty years have passed and nothing happened. We might have hoped that the passing of 1988 would have stopped the speculations, but it hasn't. As the years have passed by, prophecy experts have turned their attention elsewhere. Now they claim that the year 2000 brings us to the threshold of the end of time. Expectations are feverish again. Even magazines and tabloids tell us that apocalypse is just around the corner; all the signs are pointing to the end. They tell us that every current event, every war, every earthquake, every economic trouble, shows us that Old Testament prophecies about the return of Christ are about to be fulfilled. And of course, the practical application of many of these prophecy conferences is this: "Buy my books." "Give money to my ministry." Sadly, Christians are easily victimized by these so-called "experts." Thousands of us bounce from one interpretation to another just because we don't know how to understand prophets for ourselves.

Apathy

Victimization is just one result of our confusion about Old Testament prophecy. There is another result that we can see as well. Many times we become apathetic about understanding this part of the Bible. Many Christians seem to go through phases in their approach to prophecy. At first, they begin with a lot of enthusiasm. They hear someone teach and they find a lot of excitement in going to conferences and reading books about prophets. But the next thing you know, these believers find themselves in crisis, because their teachers have told them things that just don't turn out to be true. And in many cases, these same Christians end up with great apathy. They give up on trying to understand this part of the Bible.

That's what happened to me when I was in high school. I was a brand new Christian and all my teachers told me, "Richard, Jesus is coming back very soon." So, I even gave up on the idea of going to college. Happily, I discovered they were wrong very quickly, and I went on and made a life for myself. But I became very apathetic about Old Testament prophecy. I thought to myself, "I can't understand this part of the Bible. I just have to deal with other parts that I can understand." And I have to tell you, everywhere I go, I see Christians who are apathetic about Old Testament prophecy.

I'm afraid that many believers today are apathetic about Old Testament prophecy. They give up on trying to understand this part of the Bible because they're tired of

disappointment and they're tired of being victimized. I can't tell you how many pastors I've heard say, "Don't worry about prophecy. You'll never understand it anyway." So, we just forget about this part of the Bible.

Well, it's time to change this situation. We need to learn about Old Testament prophecy so that we will not be victimized "by every wind of doctrine." But we must also learn about prophecy so we can avoid apathy. God did not include prophecy in the Bible so that we would ignore it. He gave us this part of Scripture so that we could benefit from it in countless ways, and we should not be satisfied to remain ignorant or confused about prophecy.

I think we all recognize these problems with Old Testament prophecies, but now we have to ask another question. What kinds of things do we need to understand in order to avoid these problems, in order to increase our knowledge and understanding of Old Testament prophecies? There are at least three major topics that we must explore in order to avoid victimization and apathy. We need to learn about the nature of a prophet's experience, and we must also reaffirm the importance of the original meaning of prophecies. And we need to gain a better understanding of how the New Testament handled Old Testament prophecies. These three topics are so important that we'll deal with them throughout these lessons. At this point, we will simply introduce some preliminary thoughts.

PROPHET'S EXPERIENCE

Let's take a look first at the experience of an Old Testament prophet. If we ever hope to handle Old Testament prophecy more responsibly, we must look carefully at the experience of prophets. What happened to these messengers from God? What did they experience as they announced God's Word? As I have read and listened to people talking about prophets, at least three misconceptions about their experiences have come to the foreground. Many Christians misunderstand the mental state of prophets. We also misunderstand the ways in which God inspired the words of prophets. And we often don't have the right idea about the comprehension of Old Testament prophets, what they understood about their words.

MENTAL STATE

In the first place, many students of Scripture act as if the prophets were practically out of their minds when they received their prophecies. The prophets were so overwhelmed by the Spirit of God that they lost their senses. They went into a state of feverish delirium much like Canaanite prophets of Baal and other religions of the ancient and modern world.

Now as widespread as this outlook on prophets may be, it does not match up with the evidence of Scripture. I think we can be sure there were times when Old Testament prophets were astonished by what they saw and heard from God. We can only imagine

what state of mind Ezekiel must have been in when in chapter 8, the Spirit of God picked him up by his hair and carried him hundreds of miles from Babylon to the temple in Jerusalem. But even in this condition, Ezekiel was not completely beside himself. He didn't lose his mind. Instead, when we read this portion of the book of Ezekiel, we find that he was able to interact reasonably with God. Even in dramatic situations Old Testament prophets remained alert and aware as God revealed his Word to them.

INSPIRATION

A second widespread misconception of the prophet's experience has to do with the ways in which they were inspired by God.

Mechanical Inspiration

Unfortunately, many Christians approach Old Testament prophets as if they were mechanically inspired. We treat the prophets as if they were mere dictation machines. When Isaiah spoke, he merely allowed God to move his lips. When Amos preached, God forced every word through his mouth. We know better than to think this way about other parts of the Bible, but when it comes to Old Testament prophets, we frequently treat them as if they were passive instruments of revelation, mere mechanical mouthpieces of God.

Organic Inspiration

In contrast with this popular way of looking at inspiration, in these lessons we'll operate with a view called "organic inspiration." We believe that the Holy Spirit inspired the writings of prophets so that they have no errors. But at the same time, we know that when God inspired the writing of Scripture he used the personalities and the thoughts and the outlooks of human writers. In the New Testament we know this is true. Paul's epistles reflect his personality and his background. And we also recognize that the differences among the four gospels result primarily from differences in the human writers' intentions and goals. In much the same way, God used the personalities, the experiences, and the intentions of prophets as he inspired them. If we hope to understand Old Testament prophecy, we must reject a mechanical understanding of their experience and begin to look for the ways God inspired them as full, thinking human beings.

COMPREHENSION

In line with our other misconceptions of prophets' experiences, we often don't have a very good idea of how much prophets understood their words. In fact, most Christians act as if the prophets were ignorant, or unable to understand what they were saying. For instance, if someone had stopped Amos and asked him, "What do you mean

by what you're saying?" most Christians think that Amos would have to have responded this way: "I don't know what I'm saying; I just say what God tells me to say."

Well, in contrast with this misconception, the Bible teaches that prophets had understanding. They understood much of what they said. For instance, in Daniel 12:8, Daniel did confess,

I heard but I could not understand (Daniel 12:8, NRSV).

But we have to be careful to discern what Daniel meant. He explained himself as he continued to speak to the Lord,

My Lord, what [will] be the outcome of these things? (Daniel 12:8, NRSV).

You see, Daniel understood what he had heard and written; he knew the vocabulary; he knew the grammar — these were his words, after all. But, he did not understand everything. He admitted not knowing precisely how the prophecy would be fulfilled.

In much the same way, 1 Peter 1:11 tells us that Old Testament prophets understood, but they did not understand all that they had said. There, Peter says the prophets of old tried

... to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing (1 Peter 1:11).

In other words, Peter said that Old Testament prophets remained ignorant of the details of timing and circumstances, but he does not suggest for a moment that they were entirely without understanding of their words. On the contrary, as we will see, prophets were very much aware, they comprehended much of what they were saying. Rather than being ignorant, they had tremendous insights into the ways of God.

There are many misconceptions about the experience of Old Testament prophets, and we have only touched on three: their mental state, their inspiration, and their comprehension of their prophecies. And if we can ever hope to understand prophecy correctly, we must always remember that they were mentally aware, that they were organically inspired and that they comprehended much of what they had to say. If we will remember these things, we can go a long way in interpreting Old Testament prophecy.

With this orientation toward a prophet's experience in mind, we may now turn to a second essential hermeneutical perspective: the importance of the original meaning of a prophecy.

ORIGINAL MEANING

From the time of the Reformation, evangelicals have always believed that we must first discover the original meaning of a passage and then submit ourselves to the authority of that original meaning. Well, when it comes to other parts of the Bible, we're

happy to do that, but with Old Testament prophecy, we forget this basic hermeneutical principle. To explore how we do this, we have to look at two different matters: first, popular approaches to exegesis, and then the proper approach to the exegesis of Old Testament prophets. Let's look first at the very widespread, popular approaches to the original meaning of Old Testament prophecy.

POPULAR EXEGESIS

Everywhere you turn today, well-meaning Christians interpret the prophets with very little attention to the original meaning intended by the prophets. These popular approaches may be characterized in at least two ways: they are atomistic, and they are ahistorical.

Atomistic

What do we mean when we say that popular exegesis is atomistic? Well, it's very typical for Christians to read the prophets as collections of loosely connected predictions. Instead of reading carefully through large sections of a prophetic book, we are usually satisfied to focus on a catch phrase, or some special word. At times, a few verses come under consideration, but that's about as large a context as most Christians consider when they read Old Testament prophets. An atomistic approach to Old Testament prophecy simply won't do.

Ahistorical

As sad as it is, most evangelicals also don't concern themselves with the historical context of prophets. They don't focus on the human writer and they don't consider the circumstances and the needs of the original audiences of Old Testament prophecies.

Instead, prophecies are treated as if they were empty canisters just waiting to be filled with meaning. We don't find the original meaning that fills these canisters already. Instead, we supply our own meaning by looking at events in our day. We look at what is happening in our world and we seek to fill up the empty canisters of prophecy with current, historical events.

I remember teaching in a wonderful church in Europe, and during the question and answer time, a fellow in the back of the room raised his hand up and he said, "Do you think that the disaster at Chernobyl is a sign of the end of time?" Well, I looked at my translator and I said, "Did he really say that?" And the translator said, "Sure" — because the word "Chernobyl" in this man's language meant "wormwood," and in Jeremiah 23, the word "wormwood" is used and associated with the end of time. Well, what did this fellow do? He had found a word in the Bible and he had associated it with something in his experience, and as a result he came up with a sign of the end of times. Well, what are we to do except read our own ideas into the Bible when we read it

atomistically and without any concern for the historical context of the Old Testament prophets?

Reading our own meaning into Old Testament prophecy is widespread because so many of us read these texts atomistically and without concern for the historical context of the writer and the audience. When original meaning is ignored, we can do very little other than read our own ideas into these Scriptures.

PROPER EXEGESIS

The only way to correct popular approaches to Old Testament prophecy is to develop a proper concern with the original meaning of these texts. In many respects, all we have to do is apply the basic principles of interpretation that we use in other parts of the Bible. The original meaning of prophecy is to be discovered through grammatico-historical exegesis. This is the only anchor that will keep us from pouring our own meanings into the prophets.

As the term “grammatico-historical” suggests, we must focus on two elements to discover the original meaning. First, we must look at the grammar of a prophecy, and we do this by focusing on the literary context. And second, we must concern ourselves with the historical context of the original writer and the original audience.

Literary Context

As we will see in these lessons, it is simply not enough for us to focus on a word or two here and there, as popular atomistic approaches do. We have to learn how to handle large sections of material, verses and chapters, sections of books, even whole books of prophecy.

For example, we may be interested in the famous prophecy of Isaiah 7:14:

The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son (Isaiah 7:14).

Christians are often satisfied simply to notice certain key words—“virgin” and “child,” and when they do, they feel very comfortable that they have understood what this passage means.

As much as we may feel comfortable with this approach to Isaiah 7:14, to be responsible with this passage, we must go beyond these few key words to consider the entire context. How does this verse fit within Isaiah 7? And how does it fit within this part of the book of Isaiah? And how does it contribute to the whole purpose and meaning of the book of Isaiah? It is only when we set this one verse within its larger context that we can be sure we have understood it correctly.

Historical Context

In addition to looking at the larger literary context of a prophecy, proper exegesis also includes reading prophecies within their historical context. We must think about the

writer and the audience. When most Christians read prophecies they act as if these Scriptures float in timeless space. But grammatico-historical exegesis requires us to put these prophecies back on earth. We ask questions like these: Who wrote these words? When were they written? To whom was he writing? And why were these words written?

For example, when approaching Isaiah 7:14, we should not think of this as a mere batch of words floating in heaven simply waiting to touch ground when Jesus was born. We must bring this verse down to earth. We have to remember that we are reading a passage that describes Isaiah speaking to Ahaz, the King of Judah. And then we have to ask questions like these: Why did Isaiah say these words to Ahaz? What were their circumstances? What was the purpose? And it is only by considering this historical setting that we can ever hope to understand this passage correctly.

So we see that we have to reject popular approaches to Old Testament prophets which are atomistic and ahistorical, and instead we have to work hard to discover the original meaning through grammatico-historical exegesis. Once we understand the original meaning of a prophecy, then we have a secure anchor that will help us understand how to apply prophecy today.

So far, we have seen two areas that we must learn about to overcome our confusion about Old Testament prophets: the prophet's experience, and the importance of original meaning. Now we must turn to a third area that needs careful attention — New Testament perspectives on prophecy.

NEW TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVES

When we consider the outlooks of the New Testament on Old Testament prophecy, many issues come to the foreground. We will return to this subject in later lessons, but at this point it will be helpful to deal with two dimensions of New Testament perspectives: first, the New Testament outlook on the authority of the prophets; and second, the ways in which the New Testament applied Old Testament prophecy.

AUTHORITY

Jesus and the New Testament apostles often showed that they were fully convinced of the authority of Old Testament prophets. They appealed to the writings of the prophets as authoritative, and they also appealed to the intentions of prophets as authoritative.

Prophetic Scriptures

In the first place, Jesus and his apostles affirmed their submission to the sacred Scriptures of the prophets. It nearly goes without saying that Jesus was faithful to the teachings of biblical Judaism in his day. Of course, one of the central teachings of

Judaism of that time was the absolute authority of the Hebrew Bible, and this is why Jesus frequently affirmed that his ministry was in accordance with the sacred Scriptures of the Old Testament. For example, in Matthew 5:17, Jesus himself said:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets (Matthew 5:17).

Notice here that Jesus did not simply say that he recognized the authority of Moses, but he also recognized the authority of the prophetic writings. All the writers of the New Testament followed Christ in this way. They constantly referred to the prophets as authoritative Scriptures.

Prophetic Intentions

As important as it is to see that Jesus and his apostles loved the sacred texts of the prophets, it is just as important for us to realize that they were committed to the original intentions of the prophets as well. New Testament writers were not arbitrary in the ways they understood prophecy. They did not impose their own meanings on prophets. Instead, they were deeply concerned with discovering the original meaning of a prophecy and then building on that solid foundation.

It is very popular today for people to think that New Testament writers had a God-given right to interpret the Old Testament any way they wanted to. But nothing could be further from the truth. Two passages from the New Testament will show that New Testament writers were very concerned with the original meaning of Old Testament prophecies.

We can see this deep commitment to the intentions of prophets in the ways that Peter explains himself in Acts 2:29-31. After quoting part of Psalm 16, Peter says this in verse 29:

Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ (Acts 2:29-31).

Notice that Peter did not claim some right to read his own Christian ideas into Psalm 16. On the contrary, he interpreted David's prophetic words in the light of David's experience and David's intentions.

In much the same way, the apostle John also revealed a deep concern with the original meaning of prophecy. In John 12:39-40, John refers to the prophecies of Isaiah 6. Listen to what he says:

As Isaiah says elsewhere: “He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand

with their hearts, nor turn — and I would heal them” (John 12:39-40).

John applied this passage from Isaiah to the ministry of Jesus. But listen to the way he validated his interpretation. In the very next verse, John 12:41, he appealed to the prophet's intentions.

Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him (John 12:41).

John focused his attention on the experience of Isaiah and how Isaiah intended for his words to be understood. John did not take Isaiah's prophecy in a way that was convenient for his own goals. Instead, he sought to submit himself to the organically inspired intentions of the prophet.

As Christians, we must seek to follow the example of New Testament writers. We should not only look at the Old Testament prophetic text as authoritative, but we must also seek to discover the original meaning behind those prophecies.

APPLICATION

Now as important as the original meaning of prophecy was to Jesus and the writers of the New Testament, they did not simply repeat the original meaning. Instead, Christ and his followers were committed to applying the prophetic word to the dramatic acts of God that were happening in their day. To see how this application process worked, we need to consider two ideas: First, what kinds of expectations for the future did the prophets present? And then, how did New Testament writers see the fulfillment of these expectations?

Prophetic Expectations

Throughout these lessons we'll be describing the kinds of hopes and expectations that the Old Testament predicted for the future, but for now, we will speak in general terms simply to provide an orientation toward New Testament perspectives. Put simply, the prophets knew that sin had wreaked havoc in the world. Even the people of God had become so corrupted that God drove them into exile. But despite these terrible results of sin, the prophets looked forward to a time when God would set things straight. This future would be a time of ultimate judgment against the wicked and eternal blessing for the faithful. The prophets had all kinds of terms they used to describe this climax of human history. They spoke of it as, “The Day of the Lord.” They spoke of it as, “The Latter Days.” This great future would be a time when God intervened into the world and brought all things to their final end.

Prophetic Fulfillments

Now, the New Testament had special ways of handling these Old Testament prophetic expectations. We need to see how they understood the fulfillment of all of these hopes in Christ. In the days of Jesus and the apostles, many Israelites expected that the Day of Retribution was coming very soon. They longed for the Messiah who would bring human history to its climax. And in a word, Christians received Jesus as the Messiah and therefore as the fulfillment of all of these prophetic hopes. Jesus became the hermeneutical center for Christian understanding of Old Testament prophecy.

Jesus himself insisted that interpretation of the prophets must be Christ-centered. He stressed the importance of Christ-centered interpretation on the road to Emmaus as he talked to his disciples. In Luke 24:25-26, Jesus said these words:

How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory? (Luke 24:25-26).

Jesus expected his followers to see him as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. For this reason, the next verse, Luke 24:27, tells us this,

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself (Luke 24:27).

Notice how Luke put it — Jesus explained all the prophets said about *him*. So it is that New Testament writers affirmed the importance of the original expectations of prophecy. But they also related these prophetic expectations to the person and work of Christ.

Originally, Old Testament prophets set a trajectory of hope, a trajectory of expectation. A future time of great judgment and blessing was coming. Now the New Testament takes that trajectory and traces it into the future and finds fulfillment in the first coming of Christ, in his kingdom today and in the end of the world when Christ returns in glory.

As we will see later in this series of lessons, the New Testament explains that Christ fulfilled all Old Testament prophetic expectations in these three stages of his kingdom: He accomplished much in the inauguration of his kingdom, his earthly ministry two thousand years ago. He continues to fulfill Old Testament expectations in the continuation of his kingdom throughout the whole history of the church. And in the end, Christ will bring all prophecies to complete fulfillment when he returns and brings the consummation of his kingdom. These three stages of Christ's work provided New Testament writers with a hermeneutical model, and with this model, they were able to apply all the expectations and hopes of the Old Testament prophets to their day.

As followers of Christ, we also must learn how to take the expectations of Old Testament prophecy and apply them to the first coming of Christ, the continuation of his kingdom and the second coming of Christ.

CONCLUSION

In this introductory lesson, we have touched on four subjects that will guide our entire study of Old Testament prophecy. We must overcome our confusion over this part of the Bible by focusing on three essential hermeneutical perspectives: We must learn about the experience of prophets, and we must reaffirm the importance of the original meaning of prophecy. And then we must learn how to follow the New Testament perspectives on prophecy.

In the lessons that follow, we are going to explore these three essential hermeneutical perspectives even further. First, we will take a look at the experience of a prophet, and then we are going to take a look at the importance of original meaning. And then, finally, we will explore even more thoroughly how New Testament writers handled Old Testament prophecy. As we look at these various topics, we will discover an outlook on prophecy that will edify the church and bring glory to our God.

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He Gave Us Prophets

LESSON
ONE

Essential Hermeneutical
Perspectives
Faculty Forum



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He Gave Us Prophets

Lesson One: Essential Hermeneutical Perspectives

Faculty Forum

With

Dr. Gregg R. Allison
Dr. David Correa
Pastor Ornan Cruz
Mr. Sherif Atef Fahim
Dr. Russel T. Fuller
Dr. David B. Garner
Dr. Mark Gignilliat
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Dr. Douglas Gropp
Dr. Dennis E. Johnson
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Dr. Craig S. Keener
Pastor Doug McConnell
Dr. Chip McDaniel
Dr. Donna Petter

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.
Dr. Mike Ross
Dr. Imad Shehadeh
Dr. Daniel B. Wallace
Dr. Guy Waters

Question 1:

What makes prophetic books so difficult to understand?

Mr. Sherif Atef Fahim, translation

At least two issues make prophetic books so difficult to understand. First, readers don't know the details well for most of the events related to the prophetic books. This is different, for example, from approaches to the Pentateuch. In the Pentateuch, when we read the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis, the readers can easily follow the sequence of the story: Joseph was sold; he went to Egypt; he was imprisoned and then became the second-ranked man in Egypt. The details are clear. But in the prophetic books, there are many events. There are numerous kings and more than one exile. There is the Assyrian exile and the Babylonian exile. The Babylonian exile occurred in three stages. So, because of the many details, people get lost as they read the text. This creates difficulty for us. The second issue that makes understanding the prophetic books difficult is the extensive imagery and metaphors used in the prophetic books, especially since these metaphors are related to the time when these books were written. For example, in Isaiah 5, we read the parable of the vineyard. It's important to understand agriculture methods of that time, the terms used, and the tools used, to be able to understand what exactly the writer wants to say. These two issues make the prophetic books difficult to understand.

Dr. Carol Kaminski

The prophetic books are wonderful rich literature, and yet, at the same time, they're also difficult to understand. And I think there's a couple of reasons for that. I think, first of all, the language itself that's used seems strange. It's very unfamiliar to us. And because the language from the Prophets is coming from Mosaic covenant, we don't always know that, we've got to go back to Mosaic covenant to try and understand how the language itself is being used. So, there's unusual language being used.

I think the second issue is that you have the historical context. It's hard to work out because there are so many prophets. We have a northern kingdom and southern kingdom. We have about twenty northern kings and about twenty southern kings, and we've got to put the Prophets somewhere in that context. If we don't do it, we won't understand their message. For example, if we know that the northern kingdom — which was for two hundred years — that they're worshipping idols. You know, we have them at Dan and Bethel. We have the golden calves and have Baal worship as well as other idols. If we know that for the historical context, and I know that Hosea is a northern prophet in the northern kingdom, when I read about the idolatry that's taking place, I immediately know the message of the book because I understand the context. So, I think it's hard for people to understand the historical context.

I think the third thing I would say, too, in understanding the Prophets and why it's difficult, is that the prophets are speaking to their immediate circumstances, particularly whether it's the northern or southern; they are directly speaking to their immediate circumstances. But they're also speaking beyond their immediate circumstances to a time of restoration, which is after the exile. And what is interesting, what happens with that, then, *after* the exile they come back, all the things that the prophets had said would happen, that some things have happened, but they haven't happened in full. And in fact, therefore, those prophetic texts still are hoped for the future. So, then they get picked up in the New Testament. So, if you think of that, we have a prophetic text. We've got to look at the immediate historical circumstances, we've got to look at the time of restoration when they come back from exile, and we have to look at the time of the New Testament to see where are the places that those prophetic texts are fulfilled. Like, Matthew says, "out of Egypt I called my son," from Hosea, saying that's fulfillment in Jesus. So, we've got to have that layer. And then if I add one more layer, then we've got to think, sometimes the words from the prophets don't come to fulfillment in the New Testament, but it's a future; it might be the day of the Lord in terms of the final judgment. So, we need to have some sensitivity to these different places of fulfillment, and we want to really stay with the biblical text. And when there's quotations in the New Testament that go back to a prophet, we want to be very careful to be aware of those, because again, New Testament writers, book of Revelation, they're going back to the Prophets for their categories. So, I think we've got to think of language, we've got to think of historical context, and then we've got to think of the prophetic immediate — where is this being fulfilled, and who are they speaking to? So, it's well worth it because these are wonderful books, but we do need to give a little bit of extra attention to these issues.

Dr. Douglas Gropp

The prophetic books are particularly difficult to understand for a number of reasons. One of the main reasons is that most of the prophetic books are written in poetry, and Hebrew poetry is a lot more difficult to understand than Hebrew prose for a number of reasons, including the differences in syntax, differences in vocabulary. We might be able to understand all the words and still not be able to put them together in a meaning that we can be really confident of... The organization of prophetic books is

not like the way Western literature is organized. It doesn't have such a clear logical structure or even a chronological structure. It does have structure of its own, but a lot of times, the structure is based on formal cues that we wouldn't regard as very logical cues. We would regard them as superficial. There's transitions between speakers. Sometimes we don't know, the text will say "I," and we won't know who's speaking, or "you," and we won't know who's being addressed. As part of being poetic, the books are full of images and metaphors that shift and change in almost a dreamlike fashion that makes it hard for us to follow.

Still another reason why the prophetic books are difficult to understand is just the nature, the mysterious nature to us of prophetic inspiration. Prophets saw themselves as speaking the very words of God. They weren't their own words. They were authoritative messengers, diplomats from the Lord, and they weren't speaking their own words. And that's very difficult for us to understand, even though we can compare ... prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel and analyze their language and see, well, they have a lot of similar themes to one another, but they speak a very different language. So, we could say that the language of Jeremiah very much reflects the personality of Jeremiah, or the language of Ezekiel very much reflects the personality of Ezekiel. And yet, those prophets were very conscious that those words were nevertheless not their own words, but the words of the Lord.

Dr. Donna Petter

Prophetic book literature is very difficult to understand, and I would say for three, really three main reasons. First of all, the designation of the genre itself that derives from the text is misleading because, when you think "prophetic," you tend to think predictions of the future *only*. But the prophetic literature as a literary slice is way more than just prediction. And anyone who were to pick up the Prophets and read it would see that. But, so, the overall designation — "prophetic literature" — is almost a deterrent for people understanding what this block is about because it is way more than just prediction in nature. So that's the first thing.

But the second thing that makes predictive literature, or prophecy, hard to understand initially, or difficult to grasp, is because of the very genre itself. If you were to pick up Amos or Hosea, for example, you will soon see that it is filled with poetic language. And, by nature, poetic language means it utilizes a lot of figures of speech, and it also utilizes a lot of parallelism. So, when I say figures of speech, we're talking about metaphorical language, we're talking about similes, comparisons, contrasts, and we're also talking about hyperbolic language, and that makes it hard for *any* reader, in *any* time, to figure out what is the meaning of that figure of speech. And so, it's almost like it's a two-step process because you're figuring out what this figure of speech is, and then you're trying to understand meaning beyond that. The other reason it's difficult in terms of the literary genre has to do with the fact that that same genre that utilizes a lot of figures of speech also uses parallelism. So, one line could be repeating itself right after the other; one line could be in contrast to the other line; and so, the reader has to follow that carefully, because a lot of concepts are actually

being repeated twice. And so, in that sense, the genre of the prophetic literature is tricky...

And I think the third reason that I would say why prophetic literature is challenging and difficult to understand has to do with the very thing called the “predictive element” that’s involved in so many prophecies, because everybody’s asking, “when?” When does this take place? So, for example, Ezekiel 40–48 talks about a new temple that’s going to come on the scene. Everybody just wants to know, well, when is this? When’s this going to happen? Did it already happen, or when will it happen? And therefore, that is a really challenging piece when one considers prophetic literature overall.

Question 2:

Did the Holy Spirit dictate his revelations to the prophets?

Dr. Daniel B. Wallace

One of the things that we wrestle with when we think about the Holy Spirit inspiring Scripture is, well, how exactly did he do this? Really, in many respects, it’s a mystery, but there are some things we can say he *didn’t* do. One of the things we know he didn’t do is he did not dictate the words to these authors. The Holy Spirit was not looking for good stenographers, but holy men to write Scripture. How do we know that? Well, you can compare the Hebrew, say for example, of Isaiah and Hosea. Isaiah is kind of like the Shakespeare of the Old Testament. Some have estimated that he had a vocabulary of something approaching thirty thousand words. That’s just unbelievable. Hosea, vocabulary of maybe five hundred words. I mean, these are wide differences in the variety of how they wrote... These authors used their own personalities fully in the writing of Scripture. They used their own skills in writing... The author is involved in the learning that God has taken him through for years, and you don’t have these authors writing down what God is dictating, except on very few occasions, like when Moses wrote down the Ten Commandments. But they’re using their personalities, their gifts, their talents, their backgrounds, their language skills, their *research* skills. When they write the gospels they’re not sitting down in a room saying, “Okay, Spirit of God, tell me what Jesus did, and I’ll just copy down what you tell me.” That’s not at all what happened.

Dr. Riad Kassis

Many would think that God was dictating to a secretary who was just typing what God was saying, and that was the prophet. But I think God, who created our personalities and gave us brains and mind and gave us a culture to live in, has directed the prophets in the Old Testament using their personalities, their understanding, their knowledge in a way, through the Holy Spirit, to convey his message to us. So, I think God did not dictate word-by-word, but he used the knowledge, the personality of the prophets of the Old Testament.

Dr. David B. Garner

As you look at the total package of both Old and New Testaments together, one of the themes that stands out is that God's people are fully aware that Scripture is nothing less than God's very own words to his people. They are also aware that Scripture has come to them through prophets, through apostles, and that God has used the mouthpieces of humans to deliver his Word as well as to pen his Word. In more recent years, there have been questions that have risen to the surface in terms of, well, then, are we saying that human authors had no role whatsoever in Scripture? Is this almost like the human authors are a robot that simply pen what they hear? Well, there are certain places in Scripture in which we find almost precisely that, in which God says something, the prophet hears it, and he writes it down. It is that explicit. I think of the Ten Commandments as a prime example of that. I think there's also a broader issue here in terms of the way in which we think about God using human words. God is completely other than we are, and the use of words is actually an act of God's condescending kindness to us. And when you look at a passage like 2 Peter 1, especially verses 16-21, we find Peter describing Scripture as something that is wholly divine, but he uses the agent of the human to write it down. It is quite true that Peter understands that the human author is not just passively involved but very actively involved... So, the human author is actually actively involved, and he's thinking, he's writing, but in all of that, the Holy Spirit is superintending so that what is written is precisely what God wants to be written, albeit using the various personalities, experiences, cultural and contextual dynamics that are ever present at the time that the human author is writing.

Question 3:**What is organic inspiration?****Dr. Gregg R. Allison**

The Holy Spirit and the human authors, the authors of Scripture, work together in organic inspiration. As the biblical author is writing, the Holy Spirit is coming alongside and moving, prompting that biblical author to write what we now call the Word of God. So, there was a confluence, a coming together, a writing together of the Spirit who was superintending the writing process and the biblical author, like Moses or Isaiah or Paul, who was the actual writer of Scripture, this cooperative effort, so that the Spirit and the biblical authors composed Scripture together.

Pastor Ornan Cruz, translation

It's interesting to look at how the Holy Spirit can work with human beings. We all can discern a little of the great difference that exists between God and all of our human limitations, made even more pronounced by our sin. But at the same time, it's very exciting to see how God gives his revelation in the midst of a human context without altering the culture or the author's own customs. In other words, divine inspiration doesn't change or nullify the culture or the values of the writer. So, the writings were brought to the original audience in their *own* context, in their *own*

culture, and with the values of the person writing. This made it so that the original audience could understand God's message much more easily. If God had spoken in his own great language, how could we understand it? This is what we've called "divine accommodation." To illustrate, think about pastors today. We all preach God's Word in our own context, with our own words and using our own personalities. We want people to understand God's message, and we use the resources that are available to us to make this possible. Now, our great goal is that God's Word remains unchanged. In the Old Testament, human authors held to the great precept that God's Word remained unchanged, even when there was a human component used as a means to help the first audience understand. And that's the way we do it today. And I have great admiration for how God, with all of his greatness, can reveal his will through all of us, particularly through the human authors who wrote the Scriptures.

Dr. Mark Gignilliat

The Holy Spirit worked through the personality and the perspective of the particular prophet that he was dealing with. I guess that the traditional framework for understanding that theologically is "organic inspiration," that God works through his servants, through his prophets, and uses their personality, uses their particular point of view, uses their education, and the lack thereof, for his purposes. I guess one could also think about using the doctrine of sanctification and understanding how God takes things that are human, earthly and physical, and sanctifies them for his own purposes to use them for his own means, and he does that with the prophets as well... God uses who they were, and didn't override their personalities in bringing forth his prophetic word for both Israel — ancient Israel — and the church.

Question 4:

To what extent did the prophets understand their own prophecies?

Dr. Douglas Gropp

That question — to what extent do the prophets understand their own prophecies? — gets right to the heart of this mystery of the inspiration of prophecy, how the words that the prophets speak in their own consciousness are God's words and not their own, so that, what's first and foremost important is God's intentions in those words, whether the prophets understood them or not. But I think we should believe that as they're prophesying they also understand a lot of the import of what they're saying. First Peter 1:10 and following address this question fairly explicitly, that the prophets had an inkling, at least, of what they were prophesying about, but were still searching for who and what and where these prophecies would be fulfilled. I think part of the nature of prophecy is, or a large part of prophecy is, that the prophecies themselves are generated out of prior promises that God had revealed, particularly the promise, the threefold promise to Abraham of seed, land and a blessing to the nations, and ... the promise to the house of David that God would adopt David's son as his son; he would be a father to him, he would not take his covenant loyalty away from his son, and that his son would build a temple in Jerusalem. Out of those two cardinal

promises, we could say, in the Old Testament, all of the rich and varied pictures of the salvation, restoration that the prophets proclaim are just so many instantiations, realizations of those promises... We might call the prophets “painters” of the impressionistic school. They’re using as the paints in their palette previous deliverances from Israel like the exodus, the promises to Abraham, the promises to David, and they’re projecting those forward in an impressionistic way, and they are referring to a real future which will come about, but a future that’s not to be understood necessarily in a literalistic way as corresponding in any sort of one-to-one way to the images that they use in depicting that future.

Mr. Sherif Atef Fahim, translation

The Old Testament prophets, to some extent, understood their own prophecies. It’s a common mistake to think that they didn’t understand anything, as if they received words they didn’t understand, or that they were just typewriters who didn’t comprehend what they wrote. But this is not true... They understood what they were writing. They had a special understanding of the historical, literal contexts in which they lived, the historical circumstances in which they lived. For example, in the book of Hosea, it says, “out of Egypt I called my son.” We know from Matthew that this prophecy was fulfilled in Christ when he returned from Egypt. Although Hosea might not have known that what he wrote was about Christ, he understood that the Lord was talking about how he rescued his people from Egypt during the time of the exodus. So, the prophets understood what they wrote. Even though they didn’t have the full understanding that we have through the New Testament, they understood to a large extent what they wrote.

Dr. Mike Ross

When we study the prophets, it’s often asked, did these men really understand everything they were talking about? And the answer is, I think generally, yes. First of all, they were forthtelling. They were speaking forth the word of God into their own historical context. So, they were dealing with social issues and issues of spiritual nature, foreign religions, idolatry, spiritual decline in their own country. They were dealing with political issues. World events were surrounding them and swirling in and out of their lives and they understood that context as much as a preacher today does. They also had some idea that there was a second venue for their prophecy. They were looking down the corridors of time to some figure they knew as the Anointed One or the Messiah. And they did have an understanding that this prophecy that they were saying to the people in their context had some futuristic fulfillment as well. The third dimension I think they also understood, they had this idea of the great “day of the Lord.” That could be a catastrophic event in their own time. For example, when Joel talks about the day of the Lord coming and this locust plague that would happen in just a few years within his lifetime. Or the day of the Lord when the Messiah arrives. And then finally, there was a day of the Lord way down the corridors of history for the end of time, the consummation of the ages. And they seemed to understand that there was a glorious restoration that was going to take place, not just historically in their context, but for the whole creation and for the kingdom of God, and some victorious, final cataclysmic event where this messianic figure would restore all the

creation to its original intended order and purpose. And I think, perhaps with decreasing clarity, they understood these three venues, but they did know that they were speaking for God. Thus they said all the time, “Thus saith the Lord.”

Dr. Russel T. Fuller

Well, the prophets did understand some of their own prophecies, I think, especially the ones that were fulfilled in their own day. So, for instance, when Joel is talking about a coming locust plague and so forth, he would be there in his own day to see the fulfillment of it. So, there’s no question that the prophets had a pretty good understanding of their prophecies, especially those that were going to happen in the near future. Now, for those prophecies, however, that were going to be for a more distant future, they had some difficulties with that. The New Testament tells us that. Peter talks about how that the prophets were making careful search and inquiry about their own prophecies, trying to put these things together, investigating things like, you know, what manner of time or what kind of person it was that was going to fulfill their prophecies. So, certain aspects of their prophecies, I think they understood very well; other aspects of their own prophecies, a little different and more difficult.

Question 5:

Why is it important to search for the original meaning of biblical passages?

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

Searching for the original meaning in biblical passages is critical because that’s where our basis of divine authority is. If we don’t know what God intended in a passage of the Bible, then we can’t say what its meaning is for us today. So, original meaning is a critical starting point for making modern application. And, in fact, saying the Bible means things that are contradictory to or even outside of original meaning can be one of the most unhelpful and even self-serving things that people do in the church.

Dr. Dennis E. Johnson

Knowing the original meaning of a biblical passage helps us to apply it to our own lives because we recognize that a key component to its original meaning is understanding its original purpose, that is, the change that God designed that text to accomplish in its first audience, in its first readers — in the light of their situation, in the light of their frame of reference, how much of Scripture they knew at that point or had access to, in the light of the trials, the temptations that they were facing — that was God’s application to them. The meaning, really, was serving the purpose of effecting his Holy Spirit’s sanctifying purpose in their lives. Well, the Spirit’s purpose in their lives is in continuity with the Holy Spirit’s purpose in our lives. So, the more we can understand their situation, their need, and therefore, the purpose for which God gave that text in the original setting and to the original audience, that sets a trajectory for how the Spirit intends to apply that text in our life and our situation. And that should be our guide as pastors, preachers, teachers in the way we apply the

text. We ask, how did God intend it to make a change, to make a difference in their lives then, and then how does that carry over into the Holy Spirit's purpose in conforming us more and more to the image of Christ today?

Question 6:

Why should we avoid reading the prophetic texts atomistically, or in isolation from their literary context?

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

I think a lot of times when Christians read Old Testament prophets they face a very serious problem, and that is, at first blush, it's not like reading the book of Galatians or the book of Ephesians, which sort of easily make sense to us. We're familiar with them. We know them. We can kind of read one verse and see how it connects to the next and that sort of thing. But when it comes to prophets — Old Testament prophets — we're so unfamiliar with what they say that it's hard to read big chunks of it. It's hard to read chapters upon chapters upon chapters and see how the thought flows from one verse to the next, to the next, to the next. And so, what we end up doing is doing our best to understand what they say, but we end up getting stuck on tiny little pieces, often the tiny little pieces that the New Testament quotes; that sort of is often our entry into the prophets. But we'll focus on maybe one verse, maybe two and say, "What does this mean?" Well, anytime you take one or two verses of the Bible, or one or two sentences out of a conversation, and isolate all your attention on that tiny little bit of a conversation or a part of the Bible, then you're going to easily misunderstand what's being said. The best way to understand what's said in a little piece of the Bible, a verse or two, is to understand how that little piece fits into the larger context. And believe it or not, if you do the hard work, you can actually see that the flow of Old Testament prophetic books makes sense, that there actually is structure to it, that there actually is a literary pattern that you can follow. The logic of it is there. And when you get those pieces of logic, those larger chunks of logic in the prophetic word, then you can go back to those little tiny verses, those one or two lines that you may be familiar with because you heard it somewhere or because you saw it in the New Testament, you can go back to those little pieces, and you can make better sense out of them, because when the New Testament writers, when Jesus and his apostles and prophets, when they refer to Old Testament prophecy, they often just did little snippets, but they referred to those snippets in the light of the larger context that they knew very well from where they lived in their day, because they had been taught the prophets, and they knew better than simply to read a verse in isolation. But rather than quote the whole chapter, they quote the key verse that fit with what they were trying to say at that particular time. But for you and me, when we go back to those little snippets out of the Old Testament, we need to do what Jesus and early Christians were able to do, and that is stick it back into its context and understand what it meant in its literary arrangement within the prophetic book.

Dr. Craig S. Keener

Interpreters today often will read texts apart from their literary context. One example of that in the Prophets is how people often interpret Ezekiel 28. I mean, Ezekiel 28 in context with Ezekiel 27 — it's in a series of oracles against nations — 27 and 28 are oracles against the prince of Tyre, but this prince of Tyre exalts himself, as ancient kings often did, acts as if he's divine, and so it addresses him as like, "you've made yourself a god." It calls him a covering cherub in the garden, in God's garden. And it goes on to talk about how he will die the death of a man in the heart of the seas — which is where Tyre was actually located at that point; it was an island kingdom — and how the wealth and the wisdom of Tyre would be brought to nothing. Well, people often say that that must be referring to Satan because Satan was a cherub in the Garden of Eden. Aside from the fact that, in Genesis 3:24, the cherubim were actually good characters in the Garden of Eden, they say, well, but no, it has to be a supernatural being because it says it's in the Garden of Eden. Well, if you read further in the context ... you find out that Pharaoh was a tree in God's garden, and all these kings are called trees in God's garden. It's figurative language. And if we don't read the whole context, we won't get that.

Dr. Carol Kaminski

When it comes to interpreting the Prophets and preaching from the Prophets, I think one of the things that happens in the contemporary culture is that we're not always sure where the Prophets fit in historical narrative. And if you look at the Prophets, you've got sixteen prophetic books. The Prophets are not written in chronological order, so that makes it difficult to put them in their historical context. In fact, it looks like the Prophets are grouped according to the length of the book, so therefore, for someone who's preaching from the Prophets, they have to do additional work to try and put it in its historical context and in its literary context. So, that's a lot of work to do that, and so what people tend to do is pull out Bible verses. They will take it in isolation, not being in the historical context of the book or in the literary context. And an example you see is, I often hear sermons from Joel that God will restore what the locust has eaten, and it is taken to be a promise that, you know, if you've had difficult things in your life that God is going to restore that. And again, if you look at within the book of Joel in its own literary context, no, the locusts are referring to the Babylonian army that's coming. It has a historical context, and of course theological context. So, it is referring to the Babylonians coming against — the locusts is potentially a real plague of locusts or it might be simply a metaphor for the army. So, when God is saying he is going to restore that, it's speaking about the restoration coming after the exile, that there is going to be a restoration time. And so it's not speaking about a personal promise of individual restoration, but it's speaking about a promise of corporate restoration for Israel. Now, is God a God who restores people? Absolutely. But is ... Joel promising that for the contemporary reader today? No, I don't think it's an individual promise of restoration. I think it is giving a corporate promise for Israel. So, I think that's one of the ways that we do that. We pull out these Bible verses, give the promise without really understanding the context and the literary context.

Question 7:**What is the danger in reading prophetic texts ahistorically, or in isolation from their historic context?****Dr. Donna Petter**

Reading prophetic texts void of their historical context is detrimental to a correct interpretation of the prophets. You would no more do that than you would try to understand me apart, really, from my family — my mom, my dad, my siblings. Of course you can understand me on my own, but whenever you put me in the context — my historical context of the family of origin that I come from — then I begin to make a lot more sense to you. And so, it is very similar with the biblical text. You extract the historical context, and then that text can mean *anything* to *anybody* at *any* time. But the problem with that is that these texts are not ahistorical. They have a target audience, and there is a target timeframe in which that audience is addressed. And it could be a prophet to the eighth century, or the seventh century, or the sixth, or the fifth. And in each of those centuries there is something that is going on historically that is critical, and typically it's the people of God who are interacting with another superpower. Whether it be the Assyrians and God's people interacting, whether it be the Babylonians and God's people interacting, there's always a historical context from which the interactions take place. And so, God's prophets are often addressing international political situations and then, also, the situation with Israel. And the two of them collide together. And so, it's imperative then that we as modern readers recall and remember that these prophets were not written in a vacuum, but they can hang their hat, as it were, on a very real historical landscape that helps us to really read accurately and understand what they're getting after. Isaiah interacts with Hezekiah — feet-on-the-ground king — and there's all these interactions. Isaiah interacts with Ahaz. These are kings who reigned in the nation, and one king trusts the Lord, one king doesn't, and so Isaiah brings the word of the Lord to both of these individuals. But that word of the Lord to these individuals also has ramifications for the entire nation. So, therefore, you have to read the Prophets very clearly in light of a strong historical context.

Dr. Mike Ross

When we study or preach or teach through the Prophets, it's important to grasp the original meaning of the prophet's message in the context of his own time and culture, even though he's often speaking about things in the distant future. And here's why: that immediate context is the springboard for his future prophecies, whether those prophecies look forward to Christ — the coming of Christ and the events around his life and the life of the apostles — or the church age and the end of time and the second coming of Christ. So, his immediate context gives us the understanding of at least three things. First of all, the spiritual issues he was dealing with, with his immediate people. Those issues come time and again. We're told by Paul in Corinthians that, "No temptation has overtaken [us] but such as is common to man." So, we continue to have these same issues of idolatry, of injustice, of carnal living and so forth. And so this prophet is giving us an excellent historical example of how

to pastorally and prophetically deal with these things. Secondly, his message becomes a “type” of the issues that Christ and the apostles and the church would be dealing with. So, we notice in the New Testament that Jesus and the apostles quote, more than anybody else in the Old Testament, these prophets and how they addressed issues and how they laid out certain spiritual priorities and in their vision of God and his relationship covenantally with his people. And then thirdly, there is always in the immediate message some foreshadowing of a future event. It could be the judgment of God upon the world or upon the church, maybe some corrective discipline he’s going to give, or some grand vision of renewal, and out of what happens in his own time, many of these prophets saw revivals. They saw restorative works of God. Some of them, unfortunately, saw painful things like invasions and exiles and dispersions. These things become the foreshadowings, the “types” of things that will happen to the New Testament church in our age, only on a grander, worldwide scale. So, it’s really important for the student, the pastor, the teacher to study the immediate context — the danger is to jump right into the application for today, without studying the context — so that we could go from the “then” to the “now” and put our message in the same spiritual context that was originally given by God through the Holy Spirit to these wonderful prophets of the Old Testament.

Question 8:

What is grammatico-historical exegesis?

Dr. Russell T. Fuller

The term grammatico-historical exegesis has been understood that, when we read a passage of Scripture, that we should understand it according to its grammar, according to its syntax, and also according to the historical context, and therefore, we would say, how would the original hearers have understood that message in their time? And so, we want to be careful that, as we’re interpreting the Bible, we want to do it in accordance with its syntax, with its grammar, but also in accordance with its history. And therefore, if we interpret the Scriptures in a way where it’s, let’s say, out of history or “anachronistic,” then there’s great inaccuracy in the way we interpret Scripture. And so, the best way to interpret Scripture, of course, is to let one portion of Scripture interpret the other. And, if you’ll notice, that sometimes the apostles will interpret Scripture grammatically-historically. They’ll do it that way sometimes. If you read, for instance, in Galatians 3, Paul’s talking about how Abraham was saved, and he talks about the relationship between the promises given to Abraham and then the Law that’s given some 430 years later. You can see as Paul is writing Galatians 3 that he is understanding that in a very grammatical and an historical way. And so, the apostles use a historical-grammatical approach, so we should also do that. Now, certainly they use other types of methods of interpretation as well. They will interpret the Scriptures sort of theologically, but you can clearly see that almost all of their interpretations have a basis that is based in grammar and based in history, and therefore, that’s why we like the grammatico-historical approach.

Dr. David Correa, translation

When we speak of grammatico-historical exegesis, what we mean is that, above everything, the Bible is a book. It's a divine book, but it's also a human book. It's a book that was given in human language, in a certain time and particular context. So, interpreters would do well to pay attention to both the literary context and the historical context. As interpreters, we must pay attention to all those grammatical and literary aspects that come from the fact that the Bible is a book that was written in a certain language. We all know that the Bible was written in Hebrew, and it was written in Greek. So then, interpreters need to pay attention to all the good grammatical rules of those languages, to the meanings, to the semantics, to the syntax, for a proper and adequate interpretation. But it's also necessary to pay attention to the cultural context, when you can, in which the books of the Bible were written. The Old Testament books were written in a certain time in certain cultures, those of the New Testament as well. We cannot simply ignore those aspects if we want to find a correct interpretation. It's necessary that the interpreter pay attention, very strict attention, to the whole historical context and also to the literary context.

Mr. Sherif Atef Fahim, translation

By grammatico-historical exegesis we mean, first, that we have to know the language of the text. We mean many things by the language — the grammar, the words used and their meanings, the syntax of the sentences, and the genre of the text, whether poetry, prose, or narrative. We have to understand the genre of the text. Second, the historical context or the historical meaning of the text. This means that we have to understand when the text was written, what is before and after it, what the historical events that it points to are, what the historical events that occurred before and after it are. The grammatico-historical exegesis gives the real meaning of the text.

Dr. Guy Waters

Grammatico-historical exegesis is a way of summarizing, in short form, an answer to the question, how is meaning to be found in a text? We insist that there is meaning to be found, and we insist that meaning is going to be derived from the text itself. Well, how does that happen? Well, the word “exegesis” is simply a word meaning “to explain; to draw out,” and we’re drawing out meaning from the text. It’s not from the author independently of the text, it’s not from the reader independently, or even in conjunction with, the text, but we say the text says something. How is that meaning to be drawn out? Well, “grammatico,” that captures grammar. We attend very carefully the words. What do those words mean, those words in relationship to one another at the very simplest level, word-to-word? We call those “syntactical relationships.” And then we expand, we look at clauses and sentences and paragraphs and much larger units of discourse. Historical means that a text is written at a particular place, at a particular point in time, by a particular author, and meaning has to be understood in the context, in that historical context that I’ve just outlined... We do insist that the Scripture has something to say to readers in all times and all ages, but it had to have meant something to the original audience. And its words, its meanings, its reference, of course, have to be understood in that historical context. And once we come to terms with the grammar and with the historical context, then we’re in a position to say

this is what the text means, and then we can make application to contemporary audiences.

Question 9:

How can we draw practical modern applications from biblical prophecy without ignoring the prophet's original intention?

Dr. Mike Ross

It's important when we interpret biblical prophecy to take very seriously the prophet's original intention in what he said and what he wrote. It's a common problem, among preachers in particular, but Bible students as well, to read the prophecy and immediately jump to an application. I think sometimes we're afraid that if we spend too much time telling the congregation, or the Bible study, the historical context and what was behind this particular imagery, or this particular sin that he was addressing, or this particular social event or political incident, that they'll become bored. But his original intention, like any author, becomes the core of his message. Now, one biblical scholar has talked about the periphery vision of these prophets, and it's out of the side of their spiritual eyes that, in one way, they're looking back on Genesis, and especially the book of Deuteronomy. They see themselves, as William VanGemen calls them, "covenant prosecutors." They're bringing a case as an attorney; representing God, they're suing the people of Israel for breaking the covenant. Out of the other eye, they're looking down on this side of history to a grand conclusion where that covenant comes to complete and full consummation. This is in their minds, and this is in their hearts and in their vision — spiritual vision. But they're addressing the context that they're in, so we have to start from there, whether it's by their using their message as a typology, or as prophecy, or as a general inference to something that's coming later on. And you see that in the New Testament prophets... They'll sometimes make applications to the prophets that would surprise us, but when you see it in the grand scope of their periphery vision, you could say, you know, that's a legitimate inference and a legitimate application of their original message. And when that happens, then you know that you have applied the prophet correctly. And of course, we see the prophets applied that way all the time in the New Testament. We have our first rule of hermeneutics that the Scripture interprets Scripture, and that's what these prophets are doing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. They're drawing this inference or application from this original message so that both of these things, although they seem maybe radically different, are actually true.

Dr. Craig S. Keener

Many times biblical prophets were addressing particular issues, particular events, particular persons. However, if we understand the principles of the character of God seen in those prophecies, we can see how they apply today as well. For example, in Isaiah 14:12, you have the king of Babylon who has exalted himself, and then he's going to be cast down to Sheol. He's going to be cast down to the realm of the dead,

and all the kings that he conquered are going to rise up and mock him and say, “Look, now you have become weak just like we have. Now you’re being eaten by maggots just like our corpses were.” Well, how does that apply today? It’s a warning against pride. It’s a warning against exalting ourselves, usurping the role of God. It’s a warning against those who do that in society. Back then there were many divine kings, but you still have arrogant people who act like the whole world is about them. And again, it’s a warning to us to make sure that we humble ourselves before the living God.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

As Christians, we always have to remember that when we look back at any Old Testament revelation, we always have to view it in the light of the things that God has revealed in the new covenant, the things that Jesus and his apostles and first century prophets have given to us in the New Testament. This becomes our framework, our spectacles, as it were, by which look at all of the Old Testament. Whether we’re talking about prophecy, or the Law, or the Psalms, whatever it may be, we’re always having to do that. But when it comes to the Prophets, there are particular emphases that we can see in the prophetic word that we need, then, to look at through these spectacles of the New Testament... And one of the most obvious of these is the notion that there’s a moral code that we’re supposed to observe. When the prophets brought their messages, they frequently talked about the law of God and how Israel and Judah, the people of God, had violated the law of God and how, if they were going to serve God faithfully, they had to do so according the revelation of God that he had given in Moses and David and others, other prophets and the like, the law of God, the moral code. Now, as Christians, when we read the Prophets, we can learn a lot about morality for ourselves, how we’re to live in grateful loyalty to God because of what he has done in Christ. But of course, we do know that the New Testament gives us ways in which we must look back at those Old Testament moral codes and understand how they’re to be used today. It’s not that we throw them away. If we throw away the moral code of the Prophets, we’re throwing away the heart of the Prophets. And so, when we see that that prophets said, “Treat the poor in Israel well. Stop defrauding them of justice,” when we see that they say things like, “You shouldn’t have prostitution in your worship services,” when we see that they talk in terms of drunkenness as evil, and things like that, we can see that these are moral instructions that they were giving to the people of God in their day. And when we view those moral instructions in the light of the New Testament, we can see that we can find our own moral instructions from them. One of the reasons that the New Testament doesn’t give us a lot of rules, a lot of moral instruction, is because New Testament authors believed that you should look back at the Old Testament to find these moral instructions. And one of the places we can find those is in the Prophets.

But another unusual feature, or certainly *emphasis* that the prophets had in their messages, is the threat of God’s judgment against his people. And the fact is, is that many Christians think that the new covenant in Jesus tells us that there is no such threat of judgment — or *discipline* might be a better way to put it — against God’s people today. But you cannot read the first three chapters of the book of Revelation

and think that that's true, because the churches of Revelation were being threatened by Jesus himself with judgment, with discipline on their churches, sometimes very harsh discipline on their churches, much like the prophets of the Old Testament. The apostle Paul does the same thing in 1 Corinthians 10 when he says that Old Testament discipline of Israel is like New Testament discipline of the church. So, when we read these prophecies about God's judgment coming against his people, we must remember that, even in the Old Testament, these were God's discipline of his people, and it sort of, as it were, weeded out the true believers from the unbelievers. The true believers in ancient Israel would respond positively to God's discipline, just like true believers today respond positively to God's discipline, but the unbelievers in Israel would find themselves collapsing under the weight of those judgments, just like unbelievers in the church today will find themselves collapsing under the weight of the discipline of God.

But then the other sort of big message I think that you can find throughout prophecy in the Old Testament is this: it's that, yes, there is judgment for those who violate, who flagrantly violate the law of God, but there's also hope. There's hope that repentance will lead to life. And, in fact, there's even this great hope of a new day coming after Israel and Judah's exiles are over. Once the Messiah comes, this great hope of the latter days, that salvation will come, and it will come because Messiah has sacrificed himself for his people and that Messiah gives his Holy Spirit to his people, and he makes them new from the inside out. And that, of course, is the hope that we have as Christians, that no matter how hard things become in this world, even sometimes because of our failures that we suffer under God's judgment, our hope is not in this world. Our hope is in the world to come, in Jesus, who died for us, who resurrected for us, and who's coming back for us. That message of hope that the prophets had, we know how it unfolds. It unfolds in Jesus.

Question 10:

How did the Old Testament prophets understand the “day of the Lord”?

Dr. Imad Shehadeh, translation

The concept of the “day of the Lord,” particularly in the Old Testament, is that it is the day when the Lord will fulfill his purposes. In it, there will be a final judgment where God will be vindicated, and after the judgment there will be blessings. For instance, we read in Isaiah 13:9:

Behold, the day of the Lord comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it (Isaiah 13:9).

Joel says: “Alas for the day!” He means the day when the people of the earth will feel great regret because the Lord was very patient with them for centuries, and the day

has come for God to reveal his righteousness. But, the day of the Lord also includes a time of blessing when God will fulfill his purposes of goodness and blessings for the people of the earth. And some terms, like “the new heavens and the new earth,” are also part of the day of the Lord. So, there will be judgment for unbelievers, for evil, and for the enemies of people, and also blessings for the believers when God fulfills his promises to them. The theme of the “day of the Lord,” is also present in the New Testament. For instance, in 2 Peter 3:10, it says:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed (2 Peter 3:10).

We see in Revelation, John says, “I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day.” Some might think that “the Lord’s day” is Sunday, but, in context, it’s clear that here “the Lord’s day” carries the same ideas as in 2 Peter because John is about to explain the difficult days that are coming. In this sense, the day of the Lord is a vision of what is going to happen in the future. This is why Paul says: “We rejoice in hope of the glory of God.” One day God will reveal his purposes, and his nature, his character, his righteousness and perfect attributes. And this will be the day of the Lord.

Dr. Russell T. Fuller

The prophets talk about this coming “day of the Lord,” and what they meant by it was that there was coming a time when God was going to act in such a way, it was so remarkable, it was supernatural, it was miraculous, it wasn’t just normal, let’s say, historical events, but God was going to intervene in history of Israel in such a way that it was called the “day of the Lord.” Now, sometimes it would be a miraculous deliverance that would be described as a day of the Lord, and other times it would be some type of judgment that would come that, again, would be the day of the Lord. So, it was some type of remarkable divine intervention in human affairs; this is what they would refer to as the day of the Lord. But all of these things, all of these days of the Lord that would happen, was really pointing to the *ultimate* day of the Lord, and that was the messianic age. That was the ultimate day of the Lord to the Old Testament prophets. So, even though, like for instance, the destruction of Jerusalem in 586, that was regarded as a day of the Lord, but that was just a type of, again, what was going to happen in the messianic age, and especially the second coming of the Lord. And so, again, the day of the Lord is when God does a special act in human history on behalf of his people, or perhaps even in judgment.

Pastor Doug McConnell

There are several elements to the day of the Lord. First of all, and probably foremost, it would be the day that God would humble mankind and vindicate his own name. We see in Isaiah 2 it talks about how every lofty thing will be brought down, and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day. It says something of God’s patience, doesn’t it, that he has waited this long to bring that kind of a judgment upon the world. So there’s that. There’s also the fact that God will vindicate his people. Those who have

oppressed his people will be brought down. His people will be exalted in the end. Often it talks in relationship to Israel being exalted and her enemies being destroyed. And it's also a day, ultimately, of redemption because it talks about, after this day, that the nations will call upon the Lord. It says in Zephaniah that after he pours out his indignation, then he will give the peoples, the nations, purified lips that they may worship him. Now, that's also found in the New Testament in the book of Revelation where, as they're ready to pour out the bowls of judgment upon the nations, those who are in heaven rejoice because, as a result, the nations will come and worship. And that's an aspect that's not often seen by commentators, that there is going to be, even after this judgment, the Spirit poured out upon people and, as a result, people will be saved. So, it's both a day of judgment, a day of vindication, a day where God alone will be seen to be who he is, and the world will know that the Lord is God. And it's a day that's supposed to be one looked forward to by God's people as the vindication most of all, not of *us*, but of his name and his glory.

Dr. Chip McDaniel

The “day of the Lord” in the Old Testament is sometimes confusing for us as believers, because when we think of the day of the Lord we think of that final day of the Lord as described in 1 and 2 Thessalonians — either the coming of Christ or the two events that are yet in the future. When we come to the Old Testament, however, the day of the Lord is much more along the lines of events that are taking place where God is breaking into the history of the time, and he's shaking things up in a major way. And so, for example, for the southern kingdom, when Joel describes the locust plagues in Joel 1, he says, “This is the day of the Lord. The Lord is punishing us because of our sin, and if we follow the Lord, if we repent of our sins, he'll take this away.” So that major event of this economic collapse would be the day of the Lord for them. We also have in Jeremiah 46 the citation that Egypt is going to be defeated at the battle of Carchemish. That occurred in 605, and that's also the day of the Lord because the Lord is punishing Egypt. He's going to allow the Babylonians to come to the forefront of the region, and so that's the day of the Lord against them. In Isaiah 13 we have, the day of the Lord is the destruction of Babylon in which God is going to punish them for what they've done. It also anticipates that he's going to bring Judah and Israel back from the captivity. That's the day of the Lord as well. The day of the Lord is when God judges Israel and Judah. So, in Amos 5 or in Zephaniah 1, it's a very dark time, a very depressing time; that's the day of the Lord as he comes to judge his people. We also have, finally, in Zechariah 14, we have the day of the Lord, and that's when God — apparently in an event that is probably yet future if we're understanding the New Testament correctly — where God judges all the nations. And so, when we see “day of the Lord” in the Old Testament, we have to be careful to discern because usually it refers to things that have already been accomplished during that time, where God intervenes and breaks into the affairs of men in a major way. But there are times when it probably also refers to things that are yet future with respect to us.

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He Gave Us Prophets

LESSON
TWO

A PROPHET'S JOB



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He Gave Us Prophets

Lesson Two

A Prophet's Job

INTRODUCTION

In my culture, when two people meet each other for the first time, the first thing they do is to exchange names. But very soon they usually ask this question: “What job do you do?” In many respects, that's what we're going to be asking about prophets in this lesson. We want to ask: “What kind of job did Old Testament prophets do?”

We have entitled this lesson “A Prophet's Job.” As we explore the job of a prophet, we will look at three items: first, the job titles of prophets; second, the job transitions — the changes that took place in prophecy — and then finally the job expectations of prophets — what God expected his prophets to do.

Let's begin this lesson by exploring the job titles of Old Testament prophets.

JOB TITLES

In everyday life we call people by many titles; in fact, we might call the very same person by many different titles. For example, we might call one man a pastor, an athlete, a musician. Why? Because people do all sorts of things in life. Well, in the Old Testament, the same kind of thing is true about Old Testament prophets. They're called by many different titles.

To explore the titles that the Old Testament uses for prophets we're going to look at two basic categories. First, we'll look at the primary term used for prophet in the Bible. And second, we'll take a look at an assortment of secondary terms which the Bible uses to designate this office. Let's look first at the primary term for prophets.

PRIMARY TERM

When most English-speaking Christians hear the word “prophet,” they tend to think that a prophet is someone who simply predicts the future, much like a fortune-teller or a psychic. It's true that prophets in the Old Testament foretold the future, but their role was much broader than this. In fact, we get a clue that even the English word “prophet” has the potential of meaning more than someone who simply predicts the future.

English speakers get their term “prophet” from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint. We often don't realize it, but the Greek word *prophētēs* (προφήτης) from which we derive our English word “prophet” is a rather flexible term. This term combines two elements. The second element of the Greek word *prophētēs* is *phētēs* (φητης) and it denotes the concept of speaking. It suggests that prophets did a lot

of talking and writing. This is plain enough, but the first element of *prophētēs*, *pro* (pro), may point in two directions. On the one hand it may mean to “speak beforehand” or “predict,” and on the other hand, it may simply mean to “speak forth” or to “proclaim” something that is not even a prediction at all. A prophet then can be someone who predicts or simply someone who proclaims. In reality, Old Testament prophets did both. They spoke of the future, but they also spoke boldly about their own days. The basic title “prophet” points to the variety of jobs that these people performed.

When we look at the Hebrew Old Testament, we discover that the term “prophet” had an even broader meaning. The Greek word *prophētēs* (προφήτης) is the term used in the Septuagint to translate a particular Hebrew term, *nābīʾ* (נָבִיא). From parallels to other languages of the ancient Near East, we know that the term *nābīʾ* means a “called person.” It’s a very flexible term, simply indicating that a prophet was someone who was called by God. They were not ordinary people; God called them out for many special services.

In addition to the primary designation of a prophet as a *nābīʾ*, a number of secondary terms also come to be associated with the office of prophet in the Old Testament. We’ll take a look at several of these important secondary terms.

SECONDARY TERMS

In the first place, prophets were also frequently designated by the term *ʿebed* (עֶבֶד), or servant. Many different kinds of people were called servants in the Old Testament, and the term always indicates some kind of subservience and humility. But this title is important for prophets, because it often bore the connotations of an official or an officer, especially an officer of a royal court. Even Israel’s kings are called servants of God because they were the vassal kings who held official positions in God’s heavenly, royal courts.

Prophets play special roles in God’s royal court. They served as representatives of the heavenly throne. They were official servants who spoke in the name of the Great King. This is why Daniel confessed that it was Israel’s great sin to ignore the prophets. Listen to the way he spoke in Daniel 9:6:

We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name (Daniel 9:6).

The prophets were not ordinary people. They represented the throne of heaven as servants of the royal court of God.

Beyond this, two closely related Hebrew words point to another special role which prophets played. The Hebrew term *rōʾeh* (רֹאֶה) means “seer” and is closely associated with the term *hōzeh* (חֹזֶה) which means a “seer” or an “observer.” According to 1 Samuel 9:9 prophets were first called seers before the rise of kingship in Israel. Formerly in Israel, the prophet of today used to be called a seer. In a similar way, 2 Samuel 24:11 tells us that Gad, who was a prophet of David’s time, was also known as a *hōzeh*, or a seer —

The word of the Lord [came] to Gad the prophet, David's seer (2 Samuel 24:11).

What do these titles for a prophet suggest about their job? These designations pointed to a very important experience which prophets often had as they received God's word. The prophets are called seers because they were given the privilege of looking into the heavenly places. In the book of 2 Chronicles, the prophet Micaiah ben-Imla was challenged to explain his prophecy. In response, Micaiah described a vision of heaven that he had received. In 2 Chronicles 18:18-19, we read the prophet's description of what he saw in heaven:

I saw the Lord sitting on his throne with all the host of heaven standing on his right and on his left. And the Lord said, "Who will [lure] Ahab, King of Israel, into attacking...?" One suggested this, and another that (2 Chronicles 18:18-19).

This is a remarkable passage, showing why prophets were called seers. They looked into the heavenly realms. They heard God speak. They watched actions take place. They interacted with God in the heavenly places. And as we learn about the prophets, it's important to remember that these kinds of heavenly experiences were central to their ministries.

Another term occasionally used for prophets is the Hebrew word *tsōpheh* (צֹפֵה), or a "watchman," "one who keeps guard." This metaphor compared prophets with the service of a normal watchman in ancient Israel. Cities in the ancient world had watchmen who scanned the horizon for expected and unexpected visitors. Prophets did the same by watching out for enemies and watching for the approach of God in blessing and in judgment. For example, in Ezekiel 3:17, God spoke to the prophet Ezekiel in this way:

Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me (Ezekiel 3:17).

In biblical times, advanced warning of an enemy's approach or a friend's visit was important to the affairs of a city. God revealed that his prophets often watched for impending doom and approaching blessings so that the people could have opportunity to prepare themselves. Prophets looked out and saw what was coming in dreams and in visions, and then they turned to the people and announced what was on the horizon.

Prophets were also occasionally designated by the Hebrew word *mal'āk* (מַלְאָךְ) which means "messenger." In the ancient world of the Old Testament there were no telephones, no e-mail, no televisions. The only way to communicate over long distances was through human messengers, and messengers received a communiqué from one person, often a king or a military general, and would bear that message to its recipients. Very often messengers were used when it was urgent to communicate. The Old Testament designates prophets by this term because they received messages from God and bore those urgent communications to the people of God. For instance, when some Judahites returned to Jerusalem from the Babylonian exile, they were tremendously

discouraged. So, the Lord called Haggai, the prophet, and sent him with a message. For this reason, Haggai 1:13 speaks of the prophet in this way:

Then Haggai, the Lord's messenger, gave this message of the Lord to the people: "I am with you," declares the Lord (Haggai 1:13).

The designation of "messenger" makes it clear that prophets did not bring their own ideas to the people of God. On the contrary, they served as Yahweh's envoys and spoke on the behalf of God.

Finally, we should mention that prophets were sometimes called *'ish 'ēlohim*, (אִישׁ אֱלֹהִים) a "man of God." The designation "man of God" may also be translated "man from God." This title pointed to the special sacred role which prophets had. They were selected and sent by God. As such, prophets had special protection from God, and they had special authorization. In 2 Kings 1:12 the prophet Elijah revealed the significance of this term. There we read:

"If I am a man of God ... may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men!" Then the fire of God fell from heaven and consumed him and his fifty men (2 Kings 1:12).

Elijah's divine authorization is demonstrated by a miraculous display of fire against those who opposed the prophet. Elijah was no ordinary man. He was sent from God. God was on his side.

So we have seen that Old Testament prophets had many designations and titles. Our survey has only touched on a handful of these various titles that are used in the Old Testament. But we can see one thing clearly — prophets were much more than what most people think. They were not mere psychics or fortune-tellers. They had a variety of titles because they had a variety of services. And if we want to understand Old Testament prophecy, we have to broaden our idea of what a prophet is.

JOB TRANSITIONS

So far we've looked at a variety of job titles that Old Testament prophets bore. Now we should turn to our second topic: what transitions took place in the prophet's job? I've had lots of jobs in my life, and there has been one thing that's been true about every single one of them — they've all changed. I've worked for a while and the next thing I know, the job is different than it was before. Well, something similar is true of Old Testament prophets. They had a job to do, but as the history of the Bible developed, their jobs went through transitions.

To understand how the job of Old Testament prophets went through transitions, it helps to think of prophecy in four historical stages: the pre-monarchical period — the time before kings arose in Israel; the monarchical period; the exilic period — the time of exile from the land; and the post-exilic period — when Israel returned from exile.

PRE-MONARCHY

Let's look first at prophets during the pre-monarchical period. When we explore the times before there was a king in Israel, it's easy to see several features of prophecy. First, there were relatively few prophets during this time. The term *nābî*' does not appear very often in the books of Genesis to Judges. There are less than twenty references in these books, and some of them concern future prophets to come. So there were very few prophets during the early times before there was a king.

Beyond this, during the pre-monarchical period, prophets exhibited a wide variety of relatively informal services. Much of their work seems to have been temporary, designed for particular situations and particular times. The term *nābî*' is used in the pre-monarchical period to signify a wide variety of people doing many different things.

MONARCHY

Leaving behind the early period of biblical history before there were kings in Israel, we come upon a dramatic shift in Old Testament prophecy. The monarchical period brought many changes to the nation of Israel, including changes in the role of prophets. In contrast to the pre-monarchical period, prophets appear in large numbers during this time. Time and again we read of this prophet and that prophet in books like Samuel and Kings and Chronicles. In fact, there are more prophets in the Bible during this period of time than any other.

Along with the increase in the number of prophets during the monarchical times, prophecy also became much more formal. With the rise of kingship, God gave prophets the job of focusing on the actions of kings and making sure that they were obedient to the Law of Moses. Although God wanted Israel to have a human king, he also knew that fallen human kings would present a serious danger to the nation. Human beings simply do not know how to handle lots of power. They usually become corrupt and abuse those who are under their authority.

In the case of Israel's history, when kings became corrupt, it was very dangerous because their actions often brought judgment from God on the whole nation. For this reason, Moses laid down a number of restrictions on the power of kings. In Deuteronomy 17:14-20 Moses sets forth a number of restrictions on the kings of Israel: Israel must only have a king whom the Lord chooses. The king must be from among your brothers — in other words, an Israelite. The king must not acquire great numbers of horses. He must not return to Egypt. The king must not take many wives — and by this Moses probably meant many foreign wives. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold. The king must write for himself a copy of the Law of Moses. And the king must read the law all the days of his life. He must follow carefully all the words of the Law of Moses. And he must not consider himself better than his brothers.

Of course, as soon as we read the history of the kings of Israel, we discover that they did not observe the restrictions that Moses laid upon them. And so God sent prophets to witness against the disobedience of kings and the people who followed them. The prophets held a formal office to check the power of kings. We can see this close

association of prophets and kings on many pages of the Bible. Nathan the prophet stood before David. Oded prophesied to Ahaz. Elijah critiqued Ahab.

Now, needless to say, not every prophet actually served officially in the royal court. Many true prophets were rejected by kings of their day. But whether in the courts themselves or in the streets of the cities, prophets of the monarchical period held kings and other officials accountable to God's law. They served God at this time by pointing out when kings and officials violated the law of God.

So it is that during the monarchical period, we see a rise of many prophets, and we also see a more formal function for prophets as they served the Lord in the courts of kings.

EXILE

Now that we've seen some of the developments in prophecy from the pre-monarchical to the monarchical period, we should turn our attention to the period of the exile. What happened to prophecy during the exile? Well, in 722 BC, northern Israel's capital of Samaria fell to the Assyrians. And in 586 BC Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. Vast numbers of God's people were taken from their land and exiled to other nations. During this time, two features characterized the prophets' ministries. First, there was a numerical decrease of prophets. There were not many prophets who were prominent enough to have their prophecies recorded in the Bible. Daniel and Ezekiel, for example, are the best known of the very few prophets during this time.

Of course, along with the exile was the demise of Israel's kingship, and for this reason prophets' service to God became much more diverse and informal again. For the most part, true prophets of God spent their time explaining the exile and instructing God's people about the possibility of return to the land. So we can see that during the exile there were fewer prophets, and they concerned themselves much less with the kings of Israel.

POST-EXILE

After the period of exile, we come to those few generations who saw prophetic activity in the post-exilic period. The early post-exilic leader, Zerubbabel, began to revive the nation. The potential for a re-instituted monarchy arose. As a result, two things happened to prophecy. The numbers of prophets remained relatively few, but there was some very important activity that took place among the prophets. Haggai and Zechariah and Malachi are the important prophets that we know from this period.

Prophets began to move slightly back toward a more formal role again. Zerubbabel became the governor of Judah, and hopes were put in him as the upcoming monarch. As a result, Haggai and Zechariah encouraged the officials of Israel to rebuild the temple. Malachi rebuked the officials and the people of the restored community for continuing to rebel against God. During the entire post-exilic period the prophets kept

watch on the leaders and the general population as well to encourage them to be faithful to God.

So it was that prophecy became more or less prominent and more or less formal as the institution of monarchy rose and fell. As we explore the words of particular prophets, we must always be mindful of whether we are in the pre-monarchical, the monarchical, exilic, or post-exilic periods. These transitions in the prophets' job will help provide us with an orientation toward understanding their words.

JOB EXPECTATIONS

So far, we have seen the various titles given to prophets, and the ways prophecy developed in the history of Israel. At this point, we'll take a look at the expectations of a prophet's job. What did God expect prophets to do? To explore this topic we'll take a look at two subjects: first, popular models of expectations which many interpreters of the Bible apply to prophets, and second, the covenant model which the Bible itself gives as the standard of a prophet's job expectation.

POPULAR MODELS

Let's look first at some assorted models that have been used to describe what God expected his prophets to do. Throughout the history of interpretation, Jews and Christians alike have understood the roles of prophets in different ways. Some of these models touch on aspects of the truth, but they still fall short of providing a comprehensive model for what God wanted his prophets to be.

Medium/Shaman

Many interpreters have compared Old Testament prophets with mediums of other cultures. Much like the Oracle of Delphi or mediums of other Ancient Near Eastern cultures, prophets have been seen as men who gain access to God and deliver his responses to personal questions and prayers. Now, I think we have to admit that prophets did play this kind of role in the Bible from time to time, but as we will see this outlook is not adequate for a comprehensive model of what prophets were expected to do.

Fortune Teller

Another popular idea of what prophets did in the Old Testament is that they were fundamentally predictors of the future, or fortune-tellers. When someone wanted to know what would happen next, they would go to a prophet to find out. Again, there's some truth in this outlook because prophets did often predict what was going to happen in the

future. God gave them insights and they proclaimed these insights to the appropriate people. Yet we must be careful not to think of fortune-telling as the heart of Old Testament prophecy. Something much larger and more significant was expected of Old Testament prophets.

COVENANT MODEL

These popular models for prophecy can help us in some ways, but they also obscure the most fundamental expectation God had for his prophets. The most comprehensive model which the Old Testament uses to describe prophecy is a covenant model. As we begin to explore the covenant model for prophecy, we must remember that for centuries Jews and Christians have recognized that covenant is a central concept in the Bible. But our understanding of the biblical idea of covenant has improved through the years. So, we must begin by thinking about past understandings of covenant and then more contemporary understandings.

Past Understandings

Past understandings of covenant have functioned well, but with very little idea of the historical context out of which the Bible's concept of covenant grew. We have not known much about the Ancient Near Eastern contexts of Old Testament covenants until recently. So, theologians have had little choice other than to read their own ideas of covenant into the Bible. Usually, they read Old Testament covenants in terms of Roman law or contemporary legal arrangements. For instance, when we hear that a covenant is an agreement between two or more persons, as is often said, this formulation, or other similar formulations, are not entirely wrong, but is a bit too vague to help us much.

Contemporary Understandings

In the past, theologians understood covenant in this general way because they could do no better. But our contemporary understanding of covenant is much fuller than these past formulations. In recent decades many important archaeological discoveries have helped us make breakthroughs in our understanding of covenants in the Old Testament. These breakthroughs put us in a better position to understand how covenant established the job expectations of Old Testament prophets. Ancient Near Eastern discoveries have demonstrated that the Old Testament often describes God's relationship with Israel in ways that were very similar to the political treaties that existed in the ancient world. Throughout the ancient world of the Middle East, international treaties often existed between one nation and another. Although there was a variety in the way these treaties were formed, there was also consistency so that people throughout the region understood how these treaties worked. For this reason, the Lord related to Israel in covenants that paralleled these Ancient Near Eastern treaties in many ways.

In biblical times, treaties were often established between nations of equal status, and we call these treaties parity treaties. For example, a treaty between the Egyptian and Assyrian empires might have been between equals at certain periods in history. But more often, treaties in the ancient world were agreements between a great emperor and a lesser king of a city or a small nation. For instance, several times kings of Canaanite city-states made treaties with the great Egyptian empire. These kinds of treaties are known as suzerain-vassal treaties. The term “suzerain” simply means the “czar” or the “emperor,” and the vassal means, of course, the servants of that great emperor. The suzerains, or great emperors, established the rules of the relationship and provided protection and care. In return, the vassals or servant states showed loyalty to the suzerain by paying taxes and by supporting his war efforts.

One important feature of these suzerain-vassal treaties was the special role which the emperors gave to representatives, or emissaries. Suzerains often sent emissaries, or ambassadors, who reminded the vassal nations of the terms of their treaties. These emissaries would act as covenant treaty prosecutors. They tried to get the vassal states to comply with the terms of their arrangements, but often they would not. Now, emperors were very patient with their servant nations, but in the end, if a vassal nation refused to listen to the words of an emissary, the great emperor would come with his military forces to defeat those smaller nations.

The function of emissaries in the Ancient Near East provided a model for Old Testament prophets. Prophets served as God's covenant emissaries, or his covenant prosecutors. They received their messages from the throne room of the Divine Emperor, and the Divine Emperor spoke to his vassal nation through them. Prophets occasionally commended Israel for complying with their covenant, but they primarily warned that continuing violations would bring the attack of a wrathful of God.

It would be difficult to overemphasize this insight into Old Testament prophecy. The prophets were God's emissaries. They represented him as the great suzerain to his vassal nation, Israel. It's only as we remember this basic covenant model that we'll ever be able to understand the job that prophets did for God.

The well-known story of Isaiah 6 illustrates the importance of this emissarial model very clearly. Though covenant is not mentioned explicitly in this chapter, the idea that prophets are covenant prosecutors — emissaries on the behalf of the great King — guides the whole presentation of Isaiah 6. In the first five verses, Isaiah received a vision. In this vision, he observed God in his heavenly throne room. In Isaiah 6:1, the prophet reported that he saw God

... seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple (Isaiah 6:1).

When confronted by the sight, Isaiah exclaimed, in verse 5:

My eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty (Isaiah 6:5).

This passage makes explicit how the prophet understood his God. God was the king of his people, the suzerain or the emperor who was high and exalted as Lord over all. The prophet had the privilege of entering into the presence of this divine suzerain.

Even so, we have to ask why Isaiah was invited to see the glorious sight of God's throne room. He recognized why immediately. Isaiah looked at the throne of his suzerain and said this in 6:5:

Woe to me! ... I am ruined! I am man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips (Isaiah 6:5).

Isaiah had been summoned to the presence of the divine suzerain because serious, widespread sin had taken place in the vassal nation. This is the normal reason why prophets are called in the Old Testament. The people of God wander from being faithful to their covenant Lord, and so God calls on his prophets to prosecute the covenant.

In 6:6-7 a seraph approaches Isaiah and cleanses his lips with a burning coal. This cleansing makes it possible for Isaiah to serve God as his spokesman. Then in verses 8 through 13 Isaiah receives a commission to prosecute the covenant. In Isaiah 6:8 the Lord says:

Whom shall I send? ... who will go for us? (Isaiah 6:8).

The Lord wants someone to be his emissary to Israel, and Isaiah replies in those well-known words:

Here am I. Send me! (Isaiah 6:8).

Isaiah accepts his call as one who is sent from the great Suzerain to the vassal nation of Israel. The rest of the book of Isaiah illustrates how the prophet served in this function. He spoke to kings and other leaders and to the people. He condemned covenant violations and offered the hope of covenant blessings to the people of God. The pattern illustrated here in Isaiah 6 appears everywhere in Old Testament prophecy. Prophets were emissaries who bore messages from the great Suzerain on his heavenly throne, and they took those messages to his vassal nation, Israel.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have explored the prophets' experience by looking at their job. We've seen some of the many job titles that they've received, and we've also explored how the office of prophet developed and changed through Israel's history. Finally, we've looked into the basic expectations that governed the job of a prophet.

There's a lot of confusion out there about Old Testament prophets, and we can avoid a lot of that confusion if we will just remember their job titles, the transitions they went through, and the expectation that God had of prophets that they would represent his covenants. If we remember these things about prophets, we'll be able to apply their word to our world today.

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He Gave Us Prophets

LESSON
TWO

A Prophet's Job Faculty Forum



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He Gave Us Prophets

Lesson Two: A Prophet's Job

Faculty Forum

With

Dr. Richard E. Averbeck
Dr. Todd Borger
Dr. Robert B. Chisholm
Dr. David Correa
Mr. Sherif Atef Fahim
Dr. Russell T. Fuller

Rev. Sherif Gendy
Rev. Michael J. Glodo
Dr. Douglas Gropp
Dr. Carol Kaminski
Dr. Christine Palmer
Dr. Greg Perry

Dr. Donna Petter
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.
Dr. Mike Ross
Dr. Imad Shehadeh
Dr. Mark L. Strauss
Dr. Seth Tarrer

Question 1:

How is the job of a prophet different from that of a simple fortune teller?

Dr. Greg Perry

In Matthew's gospel, in chapter 1 and 2, we have an opportunity to kind of see the difference between biblical prophecy and how it functions and fortune-telling. What we have in chapter 2 is the story of the magi. And the magi see these wonders in the heavens. And they also probably were scholars who studied ancient texts of different civilizations, and they would compare what would happen in the heavens and what the texts foretold. And that was really about *predicting* the future, predicting the future greatness of a king, or the importance of the birth of someone because of this phenomenon in the heavens. What we see is that King Herod asks for his advisors to search the Scriptures and tell him where the Messiah was to be born, and the quotation is taken from Micah 5 that the Messiah would be born in the city of Bethlehem. And what's interesting there is that we can see the difference between prediction and promise. Biblical prophecy is really nested in the *promises* of God. Yes, there are some predictions about what will happen in the future, but they're really based on these commitments that God has made to a particular covenant people. Bethlehem is the City of David, and Micah 5, yes, it's about a future event where the Messiah will come, but it's really rooted in this bigger promise that God has made to David's family and that out of the City of David the Messiah will be born.

Mr. Sherif Atef Fahim, translation

The difference between prophets and fortunetellers is that fortunetellers only predict the future. They foretell what will happen in the future. Some might think that the only role of the prophets was to foretell the future. Of course, this was part of their role, they did so, but it was not the majority of their work. Prophets did many other things. Prophets represented God before the people. They received God's message and proclaimed it to the king, the king of Israel. They reminded the people of the covenant, the covenant with Moses. They told the people that there is a coming

judgment in case of rebellion and a coming blessing in case of obedience, according to the covenant of Moses. They also called the people to repent, and encouraged them to repent and return to God. They taught the people. The prophet was like a watchman over the people of Israel. So, he didn't only foretell the future, but he did many other things.

Dr. Mark L. Strauss

The prophet is the recipient of God's word, and the prophet proclaims that. We often talk about, in prophecy, two kinds of prophecy: foretelling and forth-telling. Foretelling is what many people think of when we talk about prophecy, and that is predicting the future, and we say, he's a "prophet" — he predicts the future. But in fact, forth-telling, which is proclaiming God's word, is really the essence of prophecy. Sometimes it's foretelling; sometimes it's telling the future, what's going to happen; but it's always forth-telling. It's always proclaiming God's message and calling God's people to respond.

Dr. Robert B. Chisholm

Some people think the main purpose of biblical prophecy is to predict the future, and certainly that is an element of biblical prophecy. But traditionally, a lot of people have spoken of prophecy as being both forth-telling and foretelling. Foretelling would be, of course, the prediction of the future. But the forth-telling is very important when you read the prophets, because, very often, much of what they say is not predictive in nature. They're confronting the people with their sin. They're accusing them of having broken God's law. They're calling them back to repentance. So, we could say it's hortatory. And I happen to believe that the predictive element is secondary, that what God is really trying to do in classical biblical prophecy — like Amos, Isaiah, Hosea, those kinds of books — is he's calling the people back to a proper relationship with himself. And very often the predictions are contingent; they're conditional. God is showing them what their future looks like if they don't repent. And actually, that's the last thing God wants to do is judge them. So, he's warning them, "If you don't repent, here's what's going to happen." But if they do repent, God may very well not bring that judgment upon them. Or in the case of a prophecy of salvation, he's showing them, "Here's what your future will look like if you continue to obey me or if you come back." So, it can be negative or positive motivation. So, I think it's very important that we merge the foretelling and the forth-telling and understand that's what biblical prophecy is really all about.

Question 2:

What does the Hebrew word נָבִיא (*nabi*) communicate about the role of prophets?

Dr. Douglas Gropp

I think etymologically the word, the most common word, for prophet in the Old Testament, *nabi*, is correctly understood as a passive noun form from a verb, which

must have meant, “to call,” and so a prophet was “one who was called.” In context of the Prophets, prophets are those who are sent; that is, they are called in the sense that they are called to a commission. Prophets are commissioned. But in actual usage, I think when the Old Testament uses the term *nabi*, it’s especially in close association with the prophet speaking and speaking the words of the Lord.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

The Hebrew word that the Septuagint or the Greek Old Testament translates *prophētēs*, and therefore, we translate “prophet,” is actually the word *nabi*. And *nabi* doesn’t really correspond to the notions that are hinted at by the words *prophētēs* or English word “prophet.” Instead, from East Semitic languages we know that the word *nabi* basically means “someone who is called.” And this indicates that God *called* these people that we call prophets, called them to himself, pulled them out of the normal population and made them special to him. And as people who had been called by him, they were also given a mission. And, of course, part of that mission was to speak and to prophesy and the like, but the basic notion is that these are devout people who have been separated from the world, called by God to himself. That’s fundamentally what a “*nabi*” is.

Question 3:

In what ways were prophets called to be seers?

Dr. Douglas Gropp

Another term for prophets is “seer.” In Hebrew, this is either *hōzeh*, most prominently, or else *rō’eh*. Both terms, *hōzeh* and *rō’eh*, come from two verbs, which are synonymous — “to see” — *chazah* and *raah*. Interestingly, it’s mainly prophets in the south of Judah that are called *hōzeh* — seer — but at the same time, the normal word for “to see” in Judahite Hebrew is *raah*. So, in that context, we might speculate that the choice of the term *hōzeh* may be suggesting a specialized kind of seeing and maybe as something different from ordinary seeing. In the context of the Prophets and the biblical understanding of the prophets, my guess would be that “seer” is not meant so much to be, as we might think, kind of a clairvoyant who sees the future beyond ordinary sight, but it’s one who actually comes into the presence of the Lord, into the Lord’s heavenly court, the divine counsel or heavenly council, and sees and hears the deliberations going on in the heavenly court, hears the decrees of Yahweh, and then is sent by this heavenly court to go proclaim that message.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

We can see that at times Old Testament prophets are called “seers.” Now, if you just have a limited understanding of what that means, you might think it simply means to see into the future and to be able to predict what’s going to happen, but that’s such a narrow concept of what a prophet does, and it actually doesn’t account for even the majority of what prophets do. If prophets are seers — and they are — we should actually think more in terms of them being able to see the realities of the kingdom of

God, the reign of God, and the role and the move of God in the world so that people aren't just walking by sight, but they can walk by faith because of what God is doing. One of the tremendous examples of this is in 2 Kings 6. Elisha is being pursued and he is surrounded at Dothan by his enemies. And his servant panics because he sees the armies arrayed against them, and they're cut off. And Elisha, as a prophet, a *seer*, knows that divine realities transcend human realities, and he simply prays this, he says, "I pray that the eyes of my servant may be enlightened." And when he prayed that, his servant looked, and the hills above their enemies were filled with chariots of fire, that is, the hosts of heaven, the armies of God that were there to defend and protect them. And so, the prophets begin their role as seer, typically, by being introduced into the heavenly courts so that they see God high and lifted up and his glory fills the temple — Isaiah saw that — and then they go out into the world, having been given the divine gift of perception by the Spirit of God, so they can pull back the curtain, if you will, to help God's people see divine realities. In the New Testament, one of the greatest and most glorious expressions of this is Revelation 4 and 5, God's people under suffering. And while we might not think of John as a prophet, he's doing a prophetic thing when the angel calls him to "come up here," that is, to come up to the throne of God and see the world from God's perspective and report the vision. And so, seers are ones, not just who see into the future, but see the realities of God's reign and rule in a way that will, as needed, turn God's people back to him and give them hope in hopeless situations.

Question 4:

In what ways were prophets called to be messengers?

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Prophets were called "messengers" because they were given messages by God to deliver, deliver down here on earth. Now, what's most important about that is to remember from whom prophets got their messages. They didn't just sit around thinking up thoughts or dreaming about things and making up sermons that they were going to give to people. No, they received the messages that they gave to people on earth from God himself. And very often, like in Isaiah 6, prophets are actually taken up into the court of heaven, and they receive their messages while they're having visions or having experiences of what's going on with the heavenly court. And, as God said to Isaiah in Isaiah 6, well, "Who will go for us? Whom shall we send?" And the answer was, of course, Isaiah said, "Here am I, send me." And what God wanted to send was a messenger; "I said something in my court, but the people on earth can't hear it, so what I want to give you is the message to take to them." And that's exactly what prophets did. They did that as people who represented the covenant that God had made either with all of humanity in Adam and Noah, or the special covenants that he'd made with Israel, from Abraham, Moses and David. And these are the frameworks around which the prophetic message came. The messenger prophet was one who received a message from God, but those messages were always given in terms of the covenant arrangement that God had given to his people.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

Prophets are regarded as messengers, which implies, and almost explicitly tells us, they've been given a message. In other words, a prophet isn't some lookout on the top of the main mast of a ship trying to look out into the future and see land or see something ahead. Prophets aren't straining forward to see something they can't yet see. Prophets have been given a message to deliver. Deuteronomy 13 and Deuteronomy 18 are very important for understanding the foundations of the prophetic ministry, and a lot of the criteria that Moses gives for people to judge who is a true prophet and who is a false prophet is "the one that speaks the will of God." And we see this in the calling narratives of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel. In fact, in Ezekiel we see that Ezekiel is handed a scroll and told to eat the scroll, that is, he is to own, and possess, and internalize the message which God has given him. So prophets, they're not freelancers out there trying to negotiate deals between God and man. They're not lookouts trying to see into the future. They're like ambassadors. They've been given orders, and they are under orders to speak. And you see this beautifully even running into the New Testament. When Paul says this, he says, "I have not been unfaithful to the heavenly vision," he's speaking of the commission he was given by Jesus on the road to Damascus. The faithful and true prophet is the one who speaks the will of the Lord — no more, no less — because he is a man under orders.

Question 5:

What regulations for kingship did Israel's kings violate, leading to an increase in the number of prophets during the monarchical period?

Dr. Todd Borger

If you go to Deuteronomy 17, Deuteronomy 17 gives some rules for the king, and basically it says three things. In Deuteronomy 17, it says that the king should not acquire many wives, and especially foreign wives, because they will turn his heart from the Lord. It says that he should not acquire for himself much gold and silver. And then finally, that he should not acquire many horses. And oddly enough, in particular, in Deuteronomy, it says, "and he especially should not go to Egypt and buy his horses." So, then we come to the book of Kings, and if we go to the book of 1 Kings, and — I believe it's in chapter 10 — we're getting kind of the summary of Solomon's reign. And what is the summary? Well, he acquired so much gold that it says that ... they were making cups and plates out of gold, and silver was just considered as worthless because he had so much gold. And then it went to list all of the horses and the chariots that he had. And he had so many horses and chariots that he had to build cities, they had to build cities just to house the horses and chariots. And then it goes on to say, in particular, that he went and he traded with the Egyptians to get his horses. And then, of course, probably the most famous, or infamous part of Solomon's reign is that he married so many hundreds of foreign women, and it goes on to say that they turned his heart from obedience to Yahweh, or from following Yahweh, and they turned his heart towards other gods. And so, God

sent a prophet in there, and God gave this message to the prophet, and he said, “Because Solomon has done this, I’m going to take the kingdom from him, and I’m going to give it to someone else.”

Dr. Christine Palmer

What the Lord gives us in Deuteronomy is a picture of what he intends for kingship. And in Deuteronomy 17, starting at verse 14, the Lord instructs:

When you enter the land which the Lord your God gives you, and you possess it and live in it, and you say, “I will set a king over me, like ... the nations who are around me,” you shall surely set a king over you whom the Lord your God chooses, one from among your countrymen ... you may not [set] a foreigner (Deuteronomy 17:14-15, NASB).

... but “one from among your own countrymen.” So the very first limitation, let’s say, is that whatever king it’s going to be it has to be the Lord’s choice. If this man will rule the nation and represent the Lord in his office of kingship, it has to be someone who is chosen by God, someone from among your brothers, and it’s someone who is not exalted to the point that other kings were. Kings in the ancient world were often thought to be divine. We see that very clearly in Egypt where the Pharaoh is thought to be deity, especially after his death. In Mesopotamia, the kings are thought to be the sons of god in a very different way than in the scriptural way. And so, there’s a lot of humility in this picture of what the king is about.

Furthermore, there are other limitations. The king does not multiply horses for himself. He doesn’t build a big army so that his strength is found in his army. He also will not multiply wives for himself who might turn his heart away. Oftentimes to consolidate their power, kings would marry outside of their own nation and consolidate their power with alliances. So, the Scripture right here is referring to international alliances. And we will have an example. We will have an example of the son of David, Solomon, who does marry the foreign wives and does make alliances, and it proves to be very true what the Lord has foreseen, of course, that their hearts would gravitate away from the Lord. So, don’t trust in your armies, don’t trust in international alliances. Those are the limitations. But there is one command for the king, and this is what he is to do:

When he [sets himself] on the throne of [the] kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. It shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, by carefully observing all the words of this law and [all of] these statutes, that his heart [would] not be lifted up (Deuteronomy 17:18-20, NASB).

So, how does a king learn how to be a king? What is his training? It’s not in battles, it’s not in international relations, but the training that a king receives in Israel is through the law of the Lord. He is to be a man who studies God’s word. He is to be a

theologian, so to speak. He's familiar with God's word so that he knows the mind and the heart of God, that he pursues God's purposes as he is ruling his kingdom, that he does justly, that he knows the law of the Lord that he would rule justly over the people. So, who is this king? He does not exalt himself over the rest of the nation. It's a very democratized view of kingship, if you will, but he is a model for every Israelite of what it means to be faithful to the word of God, faithful to the covenant, devoted for the true worship of the Lord. And we see this play out in the history of Israel. When we have kings who reform the worship practices, who go back to worshipping the Lord, we see that the Lord blesses them. And when we have kings who don't know the word of the Lord, who haven't studied the Scripture, who multiply instead idolatry in the land, then that becomes a snare and the Lord gives them into the hands of their enemies. So, the limitations are not to trust in their own strength. And the *command* is always to look to the Lord, to walk closely to him, to keep to the covenant, and to be very familiar with the study of his Scripture.

Dr. Richard E. Averbeck

The regulations for kingship in Israel specifically are in Deuteronomy 17, and in that passage he makes it very clear that the king was not to exalt himself above the people but see himself as a servant of the people. He wasn't supposed to multiply an army, multiply horses, going to Egypt, or anything like that, but he was to be a king who really cared for his people. And there's a special regulation about ruling as a king under the law of Moses. So, it's the rule of law through a king under the law of Moses. He was to do this by, when he comes to the throne, he was supposed to sit down under the supervision of the Levitical priests and write his own copy of the law so that he could rule according to it. This is very important. And in fact, this is what David himself emphasizes to his son Solomon when he's going to take over in 1 Kings 2, that make sure you rule according to the regulations that were given through Moses so that this nation might be pleasing to the Lord.

Question 6:

What role did the prophets play in holding Israel and its leaders accountable to God's law?

Dr. Mike Ross

The prophets play a unique role in the applying of God's law in the Old Testament. There were two offices of spokesmen for God; there was the priest and the prophet. The priest was the one who was supposed to methodically and systematically and faithfully apply God's law, the Mosaic covenant, with the people of Israel. He judged cases, he taught, he proselytized and prepared people to come into the faith. He made sure that the priests understood what the law was and applied it. But when the priesthood began to spiritually decline, and they were compromised by, oftentimes, corrupt kings, then we see the office of prophet arise more and more. There are more and more prophets, and they take a more and more prominent role as God's spokesmen in the nation of Israel. They don't go into the detail that the priests would

go into. They have this big picture, this picture of the law being a covenant God made with his people. To use New Testament language, they are more concerned with the *spirit* of the law, whereas, the priest is rightly concerned with the letter of the law. So, these prophets and priests were meant to complement each other. You'll notice that when Israel was obedient to the law, the priest took a prominent role, and prophets kind of receded into the background. When Israel began to spiritually decline, of course, it was the reverse. And they'd bring this powerful message that "thus saith the Lord..." and they're not afraid to confront Israel and say, in effect, "Now, you made an agreement, contract, a covenant with God that you would be faithful to the law, and in general you were not." Sometimes they'll use specific illustrations, but they are more concerned about this covenantal aspect of being "a people of the Book," a people of the law, and that is the basis upon which the priest has his ministry to apply the specifics of the law, or "the Book," to the lives of Israel. And, I think, that complement was intended by God almost like preachers today combine both roles in themselves. There are times when they counsel and they teach specifically specific things to help and comfort and instruct people. They're doing a priestly function. There are some days when they get up and say, in the grand scheme, painting with a broader brushstroke, "Thus saith the Lord..." and they're confronting the people with the covenant of grace and calling people to faith and obedience. And what we see in the New Testament, we can see in the Old Testament through these wonderful men called the prophets.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

We really have to look at the ministry of the prophets in connection to the law of God. God made a covenant with his people — we're talking principally here the Mosaic covenant — and you can see this most fully expressed in the book of Deuteronomy. And what the prophets were sent to do was essentially to prosecute the breaking of the covenant by God's people. The idea of covenant lawsuit actually exists outside of the Bible in the political treaties of the day. The suzerain king, when he hears the vassal king is not obeying, he sends an emissary, he sends an embassy to deliver the bad news that, "If you don't change your ways, the curses of the covenant are going to become operative." And you see this in Scripture well. Deuteronomy 32, Moses is looking forward, not optimistically, but looking into the future, to the day when Israel would break covenant with him. And it begins by the calling of divine witnesses. This is part of the covenant lawsuit, the calling of heaven and earth to witness as the jury, if you will, and the prophet brings the charges. And so, the charges will list the sins of God's people, and that will usually be accompanied by reminders of God's faithfulness. So, you have the sins of God's people as the evidence for the prosecution, the faithfulness of God for evidence for the prosecution. In the end, the people of God are called, normally, to turn back and repair their ways and repent and return to God. And so, you can say it this way: the prophets, perhaps their main job is preaching the covenant, and the covenant that God made with Israel is their preaching text.

Question 7:**Why was there so much prophetic activity prior to God's exiles of Israel and Judah from the Promised Land?****Dr. Carol Kaminski**

What you find in the story of the Old Testament is we have these two major kind of times of destruction with the exile in 722, and then the southern kingdom in 586; they also go off to Babylon. But yet, with both the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom, there are prophets that are sent to both of them. So, in the northern kingdom you have prophets like Elijah and Elisha, you have Hosea and Amos. Of course, Jonah is a northern prophet but goes to the Assyrians. And so, the question is, what is the role of these prophets, and why do we have them? We not only have these northern prophets, but there's a whole series of southern prophets. Think about Isaiah. You have Micah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Habbakuk — or Ha'bbakuk depending on where you come from. You have Nahum. There's a whole series of prophets. And in order understand the role of the prophet, we need to remember again they're under the Mosaic covenant — “If you obey me and keep my commandments then there's going to be blessing, but if you disobey my commandment then judgment is coming” — and the role of the prophets, really, is a sign of God's grace and his mercy to his people because he uses the prophets to warn them of the judgment that's coming, and he's using the prophets to call them back to the Mosaic covenant, saying, “Look, go out there, and tell my people that judgment is coming if you don't keep the commandments.” And so, you have prophets like Jeremiah who has to go out into the public place... Why? Because they're trying to call God's people back to the covenant, and thereby, they're wanting to prevent the judgment that's coming. So, you have this kind of climatic, especially in the southern kingdom, this climactic moment when there's a series of prophets before the judgment comes, first in 605 B.C., first deportation, 597, 586. And the prophets, really, are a sign of God's grace and his mercy to his people. If you look at the narrative in Kings and Chronicles, 2 Kings 17 gives the reason why the northern kingdom has gone into exile, and it says, “I sent you my prophets over and over. And they got up early, and though I sent them over and over but you did not listen.” Again, it's a sign that God is warning them ahead of time. Chronicles mentions this same thing, that these prophets are being given to Israel as a gift to Israel to warn them. And yet, we also find the sad truth; Jeremiah says this is the nation that did not obey the voice of God, did not listen to his prophets, and so judgment is going to come in both the north and in the south.

Mr. Sherif Atef Fahim, translation

The role of the prophets was clearly to warn the people of their sins, to call them to repent, and to remind them of the covenant between God and the people of Israel through Moses, to remind them of the blessings for obedience and the curses for disobedience. So, this is why there was so much activity. The people had gone far away from God, from the law, and were worshipping foreign gods. So, they were warned over and over that they had to return to the Lord. For example, in the northern kingdom, the kings were all evil, and the nation received many warnings, so their

captivity occurred earlier. The northern kingdom of Israel was taken to the Assyrian exile sooner than the southern kingdom. The prophets also warned the southern kingdom. They not only warned them using the law, but they also warned them using what happened to the northern kingdom — “Be careful, this happened to the northern kingdom because they rebelled.” So, the prophetic activity also increased among the southern kingdom. These are the reasons for the prophetic activity that preceded the exile.

Dr. Donna Petter

Prophetic activity was really profound in ancient Israel before the exile... There is a great verse in 2 Chronicles 36:15-16, and it tells us from the perspective of the Chronicler. So, this is a historical writer writing after the events of the southern kingdom and giving his perspective on ... why Jerusalem fell. And the perspective is, he highlights God's character in all of this. And so, 2 Chronicles 36 says this, that “God ... sent persistently to them by his messengers.” And why did he do that? He sent them persistently with these messengers because, it says, “he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling.” And so, the Chronicler is telling us that God's very character was such that he sent the prophets, that it was in his very nature to give them warnings and grace through these prophets. And I think it is really important for us to remember that because a lot of times we think of the prophets as breathing nothing but fire and brimstone down on their audience. But from the perspective of the historian, the Chronicler, these prophets were given by God out of his grace and out of his compassion. But the sad story is, although God persistently kept sending the prophets to his people, the nation rejected the prophets so much so that the wrath of God had to be brought about in the Fall of Jerusalem, and there was no remedy, as it were, for what needed to take place. So, the prophets then are, in many ways, visual aids — the writing prophets — are God's visual aid of his grace to a nation, but they also reveal his character and that he's not ready to just judge any would-be transgressor and shake his finger at them, but he is extending his character through bringing them on the scene.

Question 8:**What were the major concerns of the post-exilic prophets?****Dr. Russell T. Fuller**

After the exile, when they came back in the land, starting in the year 539, there were some major concerns that occurred during that time that different prophets and different leaders had to address. When they first came back in the land under Zerubbabel and Joshua the high priest, one of the first concerns was the reestablishment of the temple, the building of the second temple. And as they were doing that, they had a good start, but then they started slowing down because they got concerned about building their own houses. They started worrying about their own well-being as opposed to the worship of God. And so, the prophet Haggai came along and rebuked the people and said, hey, wait a minute; let's not get so concerned in our own ways, in our own things that we neglect the worship of God. And so, if we want

the blessing of God, we need to make sure that this temple gets built, that we reestablish the sacrifices, and so forth. Of course, there were other concerns at that time as well about who is exactly a priest. And so, again, they had to do different things to determine who was a real priest, who was not part of the priesthood, and so forth. But as time went on, when you got to the time of Ezra, Nehemiah and, sort of, those latter prophets, again, like a Malachi, you can see that they had the same problems as they did in other generations and that we see today of wanting to go away from the Lord, go into things like idolatry. As a matter of fact, they started intermarrying, which the Bible really warned about that, that they should not intermarry with the surrounding nations because that's what led to idolatry. And so, that's why Ezra did something that was quite unique, and that is, he did forced divorces, but that saved Israel from going through another round of idolatry. And as you read Malachi, you see there was all sorts of things that, again, the priests were starting to go into an apostate sort of state, condition, and so he was calling the Levitical priests back to their duties. He was calling people back to tithing and doing what the law of God teaches. So, again, what you see in almost every generation is a tendency to move away from God and his word, from his law, and so what you saw there was, again, the prophets and the last fellows, the last leaders like Ezra and Nehemiah, calling people back to their covenant obligations.

Rev. Sherif Gendy, translation

The concerns of the post-exilic prophets for the restoration of Israel were as follows. One of the main concerns was rebuilding the temple. There was a great need to rebuild the temple in order for worship of the Lord to resume according to the law of Moses. This can be seen in the book of Haggai when the people gave up rebuilding the temple, and the prophet Haggai reminded them of the importance of rebuilding the temple, saying that, "The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former." Another concern was the spiritual formation of the people by forsaking sin, cleansing of iniquity, returning to obeying the Lord's laws and commands, establishing justice and mercy, the promise of the coming king out of Zion, and the promise of the destruction of Jerusalem's enemies. This is seen in Zechariah. We can identify another concern. It's clear that the people of Judah didn't commit to obeying the Lord, and they returned to a life of sin. The priests defiled the worship and corrupted the people. So, there was a promise that the Lord would protect the faithful remnant among his people. This can be seen in the book of Malachi. These were the concerns of the post-exilic prophets.

Question 9:**What is the relationship between divine covenants and ancient Near Eastern treaties?****Dr. David Correa, translation**

Thanks to archeological discoveries, we've found that the divine covenants appearing in Scripture have surprising similarities with the treaties made in the ancient Near East. For example, we've discovered various documents showing that ancient Near

Eastern treaties followed a standard form. We find that the treaty included a preamble in which the sovereign was identified, and later a historical prologue in which the sovereign spoke of all the ways he'd been benevolent toward his vassal. Also included in the standard form were the stipulations that the treaty had for the vassal — all the ways that the vassal was to show his loyalty toward his sovereign. After this came the sanctions, that is, what the consequences of disobedience and the blessings of obedience to the covenant would be. If the subject was disloyal, curses would come over him. Maybe the sovereign would come and make war against him, destroying him for his disloyalty. Also, of course, it spoke of the rich blessings that the sovereign would bestow on him if he followed the terms of the treaty. And the standard form of the treaty also included how the treaty was to be perpetuated throughout the generations. It's very interesting that in the Scriptures we find that the Lord, in order to describe his relationship with his people, uses that culturally familiar form... In this way, we can see that the Lord chose this well-known form for the readers of that time to help them understand how he wanted to relate with them as their sovereign, their king, and they, of course, as his vassals.

Dr. Douglas Gropp

I think because of the importance of covenant in the Old Testament, and particularly the use of covenant to define the relationship between God and human beings, we could easily draw the mistaken inference that the notion of covenant is a particularly theological concept, or it comes out of kind of a religious dictionary or encyclopedia. But in fact, it comes out of the context of international diplomacy, international law in the ancient Near East. The treaty, which is the same thing as a covenant essentially, was the prime instrument for interrelationships, international relationships, within the ancient Near East. I would define "covenant" as a "stipulated commitment under divine sanctions" — as a simple definition, "stipulated commitment under divine sanctions" — and I think the power of that definition is that it applies to covenants, whether God is a party or humans are just parties with one another. Even in the Bible, there are many covenants in which Abraham enters into a covenant with some of the surrounding peoples, or Isaac, or Jacob. Jacob and Laban had a mutual aggression pact that they called a covenant at the end of Genesis 31. Those weren't covenants in the sense of having God as one of the parties. In fact, the idea that God is a party of a covenant is almost unheard of in the ancient Near East... In this definition, that a covenant is a "stipulated commitment under divine sanctions," it's important that the commitment is stipulated, in the sense that it's fully spelled out, and usually implies that it must be put down in writing. The fact that it's under divine sanctions means that it has divine witnesses and that it's a god or gods who executes the sanctions of the covenant, particularly the curses and the blessings of the covenant. We have such a list of curses and blessings in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28... What's unique about biblical covenants, and particularly the covenants of which God is a party, is that God is a party of those covenants. But the nature of those covenants, and we think of the covenant that God makes with humanity with Noah on the occasion of the Flood; the covenant that he makes with Abraham in Genesis 15; the covenant that he makes with Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai in Exodus 19–24; a covenant that he makes with David and the house of David in chapter 7 of 2 Samuel... All those

covenants that I've just named operate together and cooperate together in God's unfolding plan of redemption throughout the Old Testament and ultimately fulfilled in Christ in the new covenant.

Dr. Imad Shehadeh, translation

There's a question about the similarities between the divine treaties or covenants with the ancient people, and the treaties of the ancient Near East. Similarities are found when a master, like a suzerain or a strong country, makes a treaty with a smaller country, or a master makes a treaty with a vassal. So, the terms of this treaty, or covenant, are between a stronger party and a weaker party. In these treaties, there are similarities with the covenant — the Mosaic covenant — that God made with the ancient people, the people of Israel. The terms are similar. There are six sections, or six parts of this treaty; we can call it a treaty, covenant, contract, agreement, or convention. In the first part, there's a preamble to introduce the treaty or agreement. This comes first and is brief. In the second part, there's a historical account of the relationship between the two parties, a historical record of what has happened up until that day. The third part contains the conditions of the relationship. These are general conditions that are applied to the relationship between the two parties. The fourth part is the detailed conditions, details for every specific issue. The fifth part has a declaration of "the gods" as witnesses. We could say that, in the book of Deuteronomy, God is the witness, while in ancient Near Eastern treaties, whoever is the stronger party witnesses that this treaty occurred. And the last part in this treaty is the pronouncement of the blessings and curses. This means that, "If you obey and follow the conditions, you will be blessed. You will receive the following privileges..." While, if there is a lack of commitment to the treaty's conditions, there are warnings. According to the book of Deuteronomy, these are called blessings and curses. These are the similarities. God can use, historically, what was common in those days, but he gives it a deeper meaning and spiritual meaning in the relationship between God and his people, so the people might understand and realize how serious this treaty, how serious the relationship with God is.

Question 10:

How was the prophetic office related to the covenant God established with Israel?

Dr. Mike Ross

The prophets and their prophetic office is directly connected to the covenant of grace that God made with his people, with Israel. One scholar calls them, "God's covenant prosecutors." They are like lawyers, attorneys whom God contracts with to represent his covenantal interest with his people, Israel. So, they are prosecuting attorneys. That's why they're so polemical and sometimes even accusatory. They are bringing a case against Israel. Some of them will even use that language — God has an argument, or a case, against Israel. They will assemble, in their imagery, the people before some divine court where a judge is listening to what they say and the people's

defense to make a rendering of innocent or guilty. And this has been a history of them throughout the Old Testament. If you talk about Moses, he was the first great prophet. One scholar calls him the “pool” or the source out of which all the other prophets flow. Samuel would be the rapids of that stream, and all of the preaching prophets like Nathan and Gad who came out of that. And then there’s this great school of writing or classical prophets with Isaiah and Ezekiel and Jeremiah and Daniel, and finally, culminating in this last great prophet who was the forerunner of Christ, John the Baptist. They are all covenant prosecutors. They are bringing repeatedly before Israel their covenant-breaking. The book they refer to the most in their prophecies is the book of Deuteronomy. That’s their covenant treaty, that covenant agreement, that’s the thing they keep pointing back to and calling Israel and the New Testament church to be faithful to. So they, perhaps more than maybe any other writers or speakers in the Bible, really understand not just what the covenant is but how it relates to God’s church, God’s people, and how we live as the people of the covenant of grace.

Dr. Seth Tarrer

Thinking about the Prophets, the prophetic literature, in relation to the covenant, it needs to be said, off the bat, the word “covenant” appears very rarely in the prophetic corpus. The primary place in which we see the motif of covenant, however, is in the book of Hosea in which God calls upon the prophet to enter into a covenantal relationship with a woman of questionable character. And we see modeled perhaps most clearly and dramatically later in Hosea... In Hosea 11, we see God at pains to preserve this covenant relationship he has instituted with his people Israel. So when we think about the prophets in relation to covenant, we need to understand them in their function, their office, and that is, they were called by God to be keepers, watchers, ones who are continually calling the king, calling the priests, calling the general public at large to remember the covenant of their forefathers...

There’s another component of covenant when we think about and read the Prophets, and that is, in Jeremiah and Ezekiel there’s this forward thrust, that the covenant sort of becomes the mechanism by which Jeremiah talks about the way in which God is going to not only continue and perpetuate his relationship with his chosen people, but in some sense, it’s going to take on a new and dramatic shape or form, as we see inaugurated by Christ in the New Testament... Jeremiah has told us early on in the book that the sin of Judah and Israel is engraved on their heart. Yet, when we come to chapter 31 — Jeremiah’s famous passage regarding the new covenant that he’s going to bring about with his people — the law replaces the sin that’s been engraved on our heart. And so, in this way, covenant not only is the thing to which the prophets are calling for fidelity among the Israelites, covenant is also the thing that’s thrusting Israel forward into their further-realized relationship with God.

Rev. Sherif Gendy, translation

The prophetic office in the Old Testament was directly related to the covenant God established with his people... This is because the prophets were the emissaries of the covenant. In other words, they were guardians. They guarded the people’s

commitment to the covenant. God sent the prophets to remind his people of the covenant he had made with them, to warn them of the danger of disobedience and the coming punishment, and to affirm for the people the promises of blessings for obedience. Their role was that they were sent from God as emissaries to make sure that the people were keeping the covenant and living a faithful and loyal life to God within the covenant.

Question 11:

How did the prophets serve as ambassadors or emissaries of God's heavenly council?

Dr. David Correa, translation

Similar to what happened in the ancient Near East, where great kings sent their emissaries to their vassal nations to warn their subjects about the consequences of their disloyalty, or to speak some word of blessing in the name of the king, we find that the prophets of the Bible, the prophets of the people of Israel, served the same function. A clear example of this is when Isaiah had his vision of the throne of God, and the Lord said, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for me?" And Isaiah said, "Here am I, send me." To differ with the popular interpretation of this text as a text that speaks of evangelism, Isaiah, in reality, responded to the call of the Lord to be his emissary, to be his mouthpiece, to speak on his behalf to his vassals, to the people of Israel, and, in that case, to let the people know that they had been unfaithful to the covenant, that they were violating the covenant terms, and that they would suffer the consequences of that disobedience and disloyalty.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

The main purpose of biblical prophecy can be understood if we have a sense of the prophets as, say, ambassadors or secretaries of state. They came as representatives of God, and they came to call God's people back to faithfulness to God's covenant with them. At times, it was to call them to repent and to turn away from sin, and at other times it was to give them hope in difficult circumstances. When the prophets came to call the people to turn back to God, it was to turn away from sin, from individual sin, but particularly we see, to call people from sinning against one another, from gaining an advantage against others, from being unjust, from not being merciful, and those kinds of things, and also to call them to turn back from serving other gods that they had begun to worship, sometimes alongside the God of the Bible, and sometimes to the exclusion of him. And so, often we speak of the prophets as those who brought a covenant lawsuit, like a lawyer would bring, to bring God's people back, to give them an opportunity to repent and to turn to him and to be faithful to the covenant that he had given them at Sinai in the book of Exodus where we see the fuller version of that, and in the book of Deuteronomy.

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He Gave Us Prophets

LESSON
THREE

THE PEOPLE OF THE COVENANT



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He Gave Us Prophets

Lesson Three

The People of the Covenant

INTRODUCTION

I'm sure you've heard the old joke about the pastor who said, "This job would be great if it weren't for the people." Well, that's the way it is in many areas of life. Life would be great if it weren't for the people we had to deal with, but the fact is that we just can't get away from people. Life is made up with others all around us. And that's the way it was with Old Testament prophets. They dealt with people as well.

For this reason, we've entitled this lesson "The People of the Covenant." We'll examine three concepts: First, humanity in covenant — how did the Old Testament prophets see a covenant relationship between God and all people? Second, Israel in covenant — what special role came to the people of Israel through covenant relationship? And then, finally, salvation in covenant community. Let's look first at the way the prophets of the Old Testament understood all of humanity in covenant with God.

HUMANITY IN COVENANT

If there's one thing that we know about people it is that they are different from each other. We come from different cultures and we have different personalities. But at the same time, we know that there are certain things that are common among all people. We all get hungry. We all need a friend. We all pay taxes. Well, the prophets knew that this was true about people as well. They understood that different nations of the earth were treated differently by the Lord because God had chosen Israel as his special people. But at the same time the prophets knew that God had also entered into covenant with all the nations of the earth.

Although different Christian groups handle covenants differently, it is safe to say that many Christian traditions have seen five major covenant events in the Old Testament. These events significantly shaped the history of the Bible. At five different times God established covenants between himself and his people through representative heads. These representatives were Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David.

CENTRAL CONCERNS

The first two covenants of the Old Testament, the covenants with Adam and Noah, stand apart from the others because they were universal covenants. These were covenants established between God and all of humanity. They were not for a particular people but for all people. They established permanent arrangements between God and every human being that will ever live. These universal covenants provided Old Testament

prophets with important theological orientations as they served as God's covenant emissaries. As we explore these universal covenants, we'll look at two different issues: First, what were the central concerns of these universal covenants? And second, how did the prophets' ministries depend on these covenants? Let's look first at the central concerns of the covenants with Adam and Noah.

Adam

The first covenant in the Bible is the covenant that God established with Adam. Now this covenant is traditionally known as the "covenant of works." In our day a number of theologians think that we shouldn't call this a covenant, and to be sure, the term "covenant" is not used in Genesis 1–3. And also, there was much more than works involved in this covenant made with Adam. Perhaps it is better simply to speak of this as an "arrangement" that God had made between himself and Adam. But in the days of Adam, God established certain pillars that remain in effect throughout all the history of the Bible.

At least three pillars were established in the days of Adam which endure for the entire history of the Bible. These pillars were human responsibility, human corruption, and human redemption. First, God ordained human responsibility in the days of Adam. God created the human race as his image in this world, and when God first spoke about human beings in Genesis 1:26, he said these words:

Let us make man in our image ... and let them rule (Genesis 1:26).

All human beings are God's image and therefore responsible to represent his kingship in this world. Human beings are to live in ways that honor God throughout every part of the earth. And along with every other portion of Scripture, the prophets understood that all people of every nation received this sacred responsibility in the days of Adam.

Beyond this, the arrangement with Adam also established that all human beings have suffered corruption. As the entire history of the Bible illustrates so clearly, the events of Genesis 3 were not isolated to the lives of Adam and Eve. As the book of Romans in chapter 5 teaches, because of Adam's sin, the entire human race has become sinful and stands under the judgment of God. The prophets did not have to look far to see that the nations of the world had turned away from their Creator, and they had turned away from their responsibilities as his image.

Beyond this, the arrangement with Adam also established a hope of redemption for humanity. In Genesis 3:15, God cursed the evil serpent who tempted Adam and Eve. There he promised that one day the offspring of Eve will crush the serpent's head. The prophets of the Old Testament understood that eventually victory over evil and death would come to every nation on the earth. These basic pillars of human responsibility, corruption, and redemption established the structures of divine, human interaction throughout all of history. They extend to the entire human race.

Noah

Let's turn now to the major concerns of the second universal covenant made between God and Noah. Put simply, God furthered the structures of Adam's arrangement, but added the feature of stability for the physical universe. After the flood, God placed his bow in the clouds to demonstrate that he would not punish human beings immediately every time they sinned. Instead, God promised a new order, an order in which he would be patient with our sins. As God declared in Genesis 8:22:

As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease (Genesis 8:22).

Why did God make this promise of natural stability? What was his central concern? Well, there are at least two main reasons for the stability of the universe given in the days of Noah. In the first place, God was demonstrating his patience with the human race. This purpose becomes clear in the New American Standard Bible in its translation of Genesis 8:21:

And the Lord said to himself, "I will never again curse the ground on account of man, for the intent of a man's heart is evil from his youth; and I will never again destroy every living thing, as I have done" (Genesis 8:21, NASB).

This verse tells us that God recognized the total depravity of human beings and determined to be patient toward us by not destroying the world every time we sinned.

A second purpose for the stability of nature in Noah's covenant is also evident. God has given us an orderly world so that we can fulfill our human destiny to serve as his image. Genesis 9:1, 3 tells us that after the flood God spoke to Noah, the father of all people, and he said these words:

Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth... I now give you everything (Genesis 9:1, 3).

Drawing upon the words he first spoke to Adam in Genesis 1, God once again affirmed the responsibility of all nations to serve as his image. So we see that God promised to be patient and to provide a stable world for the human race so that all nations of the earth could serve as his image.

The main concerns of the first covenants in the Bible are very similar. With Adam, God has established the pillars of responsibility, corruption, and redemption. With Noah, he continued these principles along with divine patience and reaffirmation of our human destiny as images of God.

PROPHETS' DEPENDENCE

Now we have to ask a second question: how did the ministries of Old Testament prophets depend on these universal covenants? Now, we have to admit that the prophets of the Old Testament do not explicitly mention Adam and Noah very often. For the most part, the theological perspectives derived from the covenants with Adam and Noah lie implicitly behind what Old Testament prophets said. Perhaps the most important way in which prophets depended on these covenants is in their attention to Gentile nations.

As God's covenant emissaries, Old Testament prophets focused most of their attention on the nation of Israel, but they were also emissaries to the nations of the world. As God told Jeremiah when he first called him to minister in Jeremiah 1:5:

I appointed you as a prophet to the nations (Jeremiah 1:5).

Prophets frequently addressed foreign nations because they were emissaries of the universal covenants with Adam and Noah.

Sins of the Nations

The prophetic concern for the nations went in two directions. First, the prophets usually pointed out the sins of the nations and threatened God's judgment against them. For instance, the entire book of Obadiah is devoted to exposing the sins of Edom and announcing divine judgment. Jonah reports that the prophet ministered to the city of Nineveh. Nahum declared God's judgment against Assyria. Large portions of other books focus on the wrath of Yahweh coming against the nations other than Israel. Many passages make it clear that the prophets believed all people were sinful and subject to the judgment of God.

Redemption for the Nations

Although the theme of judgment was prominent in the prophets' addresses to the nations, we must also remember a second theme, the theme of redemption for the nations. The prophets often spoke of a future time of great blessings for the nations of the earth. From their point of view, the future held a hope of redemption for every tribe and language. God's plan was not that only one nation would be saved from the dominion of sin and death. Instead, in fulfillment of his original design for the human race, God always intended to redeem people from every nation.

For this reason, the prophets not only looked forward to a day of great blessing when Israel would be redeemed from exile; instead, many people from the Gentile nations would also participate in this great redemption from exile. For example, in Isaiah 25:6-8, the prophet announced that one day in the future:

**The Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples ...
On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever
(Isaiah 25:6-8).**

In Jeremiah 3:17 a similar theme appears:

**All nations will gather in Jerusalem to honor the name of the Lord.
No longer will they follow the stubbornness of their evil hearts
(Jeremiah 3:17).**

Many prophets announced that the day would come when even Gentiles would repent of their rebellion against God. They will come to Israel and find salvation from divine judgment. Now, of course, as Christians we know that this promise is fulfilled in the spread of the gospel of Christ throughout all the world. When Christ commissioned his apostles to go to all nations, he was fulfilling the positive hopes that the Old Testament prophets had for the nations of the earth.

So we see that in the days of Adam and Noah, God entered into universal covenants which extend to all people. As emissaries of God, the King of all the world, Old Testament prophets drew attention to the severe violations of the nations against God. But they also announced that one day God will redeem a people from every tribe and nation of the earth.

We have already seen that God made covenants with all people in Adam and in Noah. But now we're going to turn our attention to Israel as the special covenant people of God. What covenants did God make with the nation of Israel?

ISRAEL IN COVENANT

Often my family gives parties for seminary students, but sometimes the list is so long that we don't call every single one of them ourselves. Instead, we select a few key students and they call the others. Well in many respects, this is what God did with Israel. They were his key people, and he called Israel to himself with special covenants so that Israel then could minister or call all peoples to God.

You will recall that God made three major covenants with Israel. He made covenants though Abraham, Moses, and David. Each of these covenants prepared Israel in special ways, not only for her own salvation, but for the salvation of all the families of the earth. Let's look first at the covenant with Abraham.

ABRAHAM

God's covenant with Abraham was special because it was the first to identify Israel as the one family chosen to bear God's gracious redemption to the entire world. How were they going to do this? By living in a redemptive covenant with Yahweh. We should look first at the central concerns of this covenant with Abraham, and then we'll be

able to explore the ways in which Old Testament prophets depended on the covenant with Abraham.

Central Concerns

We may summarize the Abrahamic covenant as one in which God chose a special nation. The establishment of Israel as God's chosen people involved two major blessings from God to this nation. God promised Abraham many descendants and a special land. In Genesis 15 and 17, God's covenant with Abraham showed the way for Israel to multiply many descendants and to take possession of a bit of land. Now, this multiplication and possession of a special land was to be a starting point for extending God's kingdom throughout the world. From this point on the descendants and the land of Abraham took center stage in the history of the Bible.

Prophets' Dependence

We have seen that Abraham was promised many descendants and a special land. And now we must ask, how did Old Testament prophets depend on this covenant with Abraham? What did they believe about this covenant? Time and again the prophets of the Old Testament draw upon the principles of the covenant between God and Abraham. The abiding importance of this covenant is assumed throughout all the prophets. They spoke frequently about the promise of land and the promise of a multitude of descendants.

For example, in Isaiah 41:8 the prophet Isaiah refers to the nation of Israel in this way:

[O] seed of Abraham my friend (Isaiah 41:8, ASV).

In Isaiah's thinking the nation of Israel, even in his own day, was the rightful heir of Abraham's covenant. In a similar way, Hosea alludes to the covenant with Abraham. In 1:10 he says that after the exile,

The number of the sons of Israel will be like the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered (Hosea 1:10, NASB).

Allusions like these demonstrate that the prophets depended heavily on the covenant with Abraham. Whenever they spoke about God giving land to his people or multiplying their numbers, they recalled the covenant God made with Abraham. Abraham was mentioned by name only seven times in the prophets of the Old Testament, but the theology of Abraham's covenant permeated their ministries.

MOSES

Abraham's covenant was the first one with the nation of Israel, but it was followed by a second covenant, the covenant with Moses. In our day, the Mosaic

covenant is not always seen in a positive light, but nothing could be further from the truth. Moses' covenant plays a vital role in the positive redemption of the human race. Once again, we should take a look at the central concerns of Moses' covenant and then consider how Old Testament prophets depended on this covenant.

Central Concerns

The arrangement with Moses focuses on the law of God. The law of God provided the regulations governing covenant life in Israel. This covenant appears most explicitly in Exodus 19–24 where the covenant was initiated with the book of the covenant and the Ten Commandments. It also appears in the worship regulations of the book of Leviticus. The book of Deuteronomy records Israel's covenant renewal near the time of Moses' death. Put simply, the Mosaic covenant focused on the regulations of covenant life, the laws which would lead to blessing and curse from the great divine Suzerain.

Prophets' Dependence

Well, how did Old Testament prophets depend on Moses' covenant? Old Testament prophets were deeply indebted to Moses and his law because his law provided the main standards by which prophets critiqued the nation of Israel. Prophets prosecuted the covenant by reminding Israel of her responsibility to be faithful to the law of Moses. As we'll see in the next lesson, even the specific blessings and curses which the prophets announced to the people of God, even these came largely from the covenant with Moses. The laws of Moses became the primary tools of a prophet's trade.

For example, when Isaiah wanted to indicate that the people of God had been unfaithful to the Lord, he appealed to the Mosaic Law as an authoritative standard. As he said in Isaiah 5:24:

They have rejected the law of the Lord Almighty (Isaiah 5:24).

This kind of reference to Moses and his law appears innumerable times in the prophets because Old Testament prophets were emissaries of God, calling Israel to account for the ways she had violated the covenant with Moses.

DAVID

The final Old Testament covenant given to Israel as a nation was the covenant with David. Abraham's covenant focused on descendants and land. Moses' gave attention to laws for living in the land. Following Moses, God made a special covenant with David, the king of Israel. Once again, we should look at the main concerns of this covenant and then how the prophets depended on it.

Central Concerns

What were the main concerns of the covenant with David? David's covenant focused on building God's people into an enormous empire. The Davidic covenant appears in 2 Samuel 7, Psalm 89, and Psalm 132. These passages make it clear that one vital aspect of this covenant was the establishment of David's family as the permanent dynasty over God's people. David's family certainly had troubles and failures, but God chose this family to be the dynasty over his people forever. David's descendants would one day establish a worldwide kingdom of salvation. Needless to say, this covenant offered the people of God a very bright future of victory and dominion over the earth. And even as Christians today, we follow Jesus as our King because he was the last great son of David, the perfect son of David, whose kingdom will never end.

Prophets' Dependence

Now we must ask another question: how did the prophets depend on this covenant with David? Old Testament prophets frequently drew upon David's covenant as they ministered to Israel. As far as the prophets were concerned, God promised that eventually the kingdom of David would be a magnificent, worldwide kingdom. They believed this very strongly and predicted that it would happen one day in the future. For example, in Amos 9:11, the prophet describes the days of the restoration after the exile in this way:

In that day I will restore David's fallen tent. I will repair its broken places, restore its ruins, and build it as it used to be (Amos 9:11).

Old Testament prophets speak this way about the Davidic covenant many times. His covenant was so important to them that they mention David by name thirty-four times.

THE NEW COVENANT

Of course, we would be remiss if we do not mention that Old Testament prophets were also aware of a covenant that was still in their future. I have in mind here the new covenant, which God made through Christ. What were the main concerns of this new covenant? The new covenant may be characterized by one word: fulfillment. All the promises given to God's people in the earlier covenants with Abraham, Moses, and David, were to be realized in the period of the new covenant. The people of God would be numerous and inherit the entire earth as their land. The law of Moses will be written in the heart and obeyed from the heart. The Son of David, the great Son of David, will reign on the throne forever.

How were the prophets influenced by this new covenant? Well, the Old Testament prophets longed for the day of this grand covenant. For example, Jeremiah spoke of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31:

“The time is coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” (Jeremiah 31:31).

Jeremiah predicted that in the days after Israel’s exile, God would renew his covenant in dramatic ways. The prophet Ezekiel spoke of this future covenant as well. In 34:25 and 26 we read these words in Ezekiel:

I will make a covenant of peace with them and ... I will bless them (Ezekiel 34:25, 26).

Old Testament prophets ministered as God’s emissaries in anticipation of the great end-time covenant to come. And as we learn about Old Testament prophets, we’ll see them anticipating this New Testament covenant time and again.

The covenants that God established with Israel guided the Old Testament prophets in all that they did. They understood that God had a special role for the nation of Israel and that the covenants with Abraham, Moses, and David, and even the new covenant, guided Israel in that special role. And so when prophets ministered to God’s people, they ministered within the confines of these special covenants God had made with his people.

So far in this lesson on the people of the covenant we’ve seen that Old Testament prophets served as emissaries of God’s covenants with humanity in general, and with Israel. All the people of the earth were subject to the universal covenants with Adam and Noah. But the Israelites and Gentiles who converted to their faith were in very special covenants with God. They were separated from the rest of humanity. At this point, we need to look at one other aspect of the people of the covenant. How did the prophets understand salvation in the covenant community?

SALVATION IN COVENANT

Often modern Christians have a hard time understanding salvation in covenant because we make distinctions that the prophets did not follow. Under the influence of revivalism, many times we divide the human race into two tidy groups — those who are saved and those who are not saved, or the regenerate and the unregenerate. Now, don’t get me wrong, that distinction is very important because people are either saved or not saved, or, regenerate or not regenerate. But at the same time, these are not the categories that Old Testament prophets thought in terms of.

One of the best ways to understand how prophets understood salvation is to make distinctions between three different kinds of people in the world: first, those outside of the covenant community of Israel; second, those who were in the visible covenant community of Israel; and third, those who were within the invisible covenant community.

OUTSIDE COVENANT

Consider the first category of those who were outside of the covenant. In reality, this is the most obvious category of people that the prophets followed. These are people outside of the covenants God made with Israel. When God chose the nation of Israel and gave her special covenants in Abraham, Moses and David, this choice of Israel meant that other nations of the earth were not among the chosen people. With rare exceptions of people like Ruth and Rahab, Gentiles were separated from God's people and therefore outside of these special covenants with the nation. As we have seen, the prophets believed that Gentiles were bound to the universal covenants of Adam and Noah. The basic structures of judgment and redemption in those covenants applied to all nations. But at the same time, during the days of the Old Testament, those outside of the covenant community, or outside of Israel's special covenant relationship with God, these people were cut off from the possibility of salvation. Their sin had left them without hope in the world.

Paul spoke this way about Gentiles in the book of Ephesians. In Ephesians 2:11-12 he says these words:

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth ... remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world (Ephesians 2:11-12).

This was the condition of Gentile nations during the Old Testament days. They were outside of the covenant and, with rare exception, very distant from the possibility of salvation which came through the covenants with Israel.

VISIBLE COVENANT

Most Christians have little trouble understanding the category of Gentiles as outside of the covenant, but I have found that difficulties begin to arise when we move to the second category of people in the prophetic outlook — people within the visible community of Israel. When we speak of the visible covenant community, we have in mind all of those in the Old Testament days who were a part of the nation of Israel. This category included both true believers and those who were not true believers. Perhaps one of the best ways to introduce this covenant category is to reach back into older Protestant theology.

Although older Protestants used different terms than the prophets did, Protestant theologians from the past have described the church in ways that parallel the prophets' way of thinking about the covenant community of Israel. I have in mind here the traditional designation of the "visible church." Unfortunately, this terminology is not used much today so we need to take a look at what older Protestants meant by this term,

the “visible church.” The *Westminster Confession of Faith* describes the “visible church” in this way in chapter 25, paragraph 2:

The visible church ... consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.

This description of the visible church alerts us to two features of the visible covenant community. First, the visible church includes more than true believers. Many people who come to church simply claim to follow Christ, but these unbelievers have been separated from the world by their association with the Christian faith. They have placed themselves in the membership of the church, but they are still not eternally redeemed from their sins.

Beyond this, it is important to notice the special titles given to the visible church. It sounds strange to our ears, but according to traditional Protestant theology, the visible church, mixed with believers and unbelievers, may rightly be called the “Church,” the “Kingdom,” the “House of God,” and the “Family of God.” In contemporary Christian vocabulary, we normally reserve these terms for people we believe are truly regenerate and those who are irrevocably heaven-bound. But according to traditional theology, these terms are general titles embracing everyone who is within the visible church whether they are eternally redeemed or not. When we read Old Testament prophets, it’s not difficult to see that they thought in similar ways about the visible nation of Israel.

This category of the visible covenant community helps us understand many passages in the prophets. For instance, the first chapters of Hosea present a striking contrast of terms used to describe the visible covenant community. In 1:3-9, Hosea announces great curses to come upon northern Israel. He does this by giving his three children names that predict tremendous curses. He named one child Jezreel, recalling the destruction that took place in Israel in the days of Jehu. This child symbolized that God was threatening to destroy Israel. Hosea named his second child Lo-Ruhamah. Her name meant “not loved by God.” And in this context, love was a term describing a positive covenant relationship of blessing between God and his people. This child symbolized that God’s covenant blessings would soon be withdrawn from the nation. Hosea’s third child was called Lo-Ammi, “not my people.” This child symbolized the threat that God would disown his people by withdrawing his covenant blessings from the nation of Israel.

At the same time, however, Hosea also gave hope to those who were about to fall under God’s judgment of exile. The prophet assured the nation of Israel that restoration to the land would take place one day. To convey this hope, Hosea recalled the terrible names that he gave his children once again. In 1:10, he says that Jezreel will take place again, but this time he does not mean that God will fight against his people. Instead, God will fight against the enemies of Israel. Beyond this, when God returns the Israelites to their land after exile, he will rename them Ruhamah, “loved by God,” according to 2:1. In that day, those who were called “not my people” will become Ammi, “my people.”

It’s important to see that Hosea speaks of the visible covenant community in contrasting terms. The rest of Scripture makes it plain that Hosea was not talking about these people as having salvation, then losing it and getting salvation again. Instead, this is covenant language. With these special titles, Hosea is announcing that God will withdraw

his covenant blessings but then one day renew his covenant, and Israel will receive God's blessings again.

There are many terms that we normally reserve in our vocabulary for true believers which the prophets applied to the visible covenant community of Israel. When we use terms like, "elect" or "chosen," we usually mean elect for salvation. But the prophets did not mean this very often. Instead, they used the term "elect" or "chosen" to describe the people who are in the visible covenant community whether they were true believers or not. For this reason, in Isaiah 14:1 we read these words:

The Lord will have compassion on Jacob; once again he will choose [or elect] Israel (Isaiah 14:1).

Notice that Isaiah said Israel would be chosen once again. As strange as it sounds to our ears, in the vocabulary of the prophets people can be chosen by God, rejected, and then chosen again. This is because God's election in the prophetic vocabulary is not election to salvation but election to covenant blessing. The elect are those who were in the visible covenant community, and that community includes both believers and unbelievers. Even in the New Testament, sometimes the term elect is used in this way. When Jesus says in John 6:70:

Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil! (John 6:70).

Jesus speaks of calling Judas and the other Apostles to a special covenant relationship of blessing. He does not speak of eternal salvation.

INVISIBLE COVENANT

Now we come to the third category of people with whom the prophets dealt: the invisible covenant community. Once again, traditional Protestant theology gives us some help in this area. Within the visible church, there is a select group known as the "invisible church." In the language of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 25, paragraph 1, the invisible church:

Consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all.

In this confessional statement, the invisible church is described from God's perspective. It's defined from an eternal perspective as the full number of human beings who will come to saving faith and will spend eternity in the blessing of God.

From this description of the invisible church, we can see at least two basic ideas. First, the invisible church is made up of true believers only. These true believers are within the visible church, but they have exercised saving faith, and as a result they enter into the smaller community of the invisible church. Second, we can see that the invisible

church has a secure destiny of salvation. Because these people have given their hearts to the service of Christ, their salvation will be kept sure until the end.

The apostle Paul pointed to this kind of distinction between the visible and invisible covenant community even within the nation of Israel. In chapter 9 of Romans, verses 6 and 7, he says these words:

For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Or because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children (Romans 9:6-7).

Paul's idea is this — to be a physical child of Abraham may bring you into the nation of Israel, but it was not enough to bring salvation. A true child of Abraham must have saving faith, like Abraham. For this reason, we may speak of an Israel within Israel — an invisible, redeemed people of God within the visible community of the people of God.

This idea of the invisible church parallels the thinking of Old Testament prophets. They looked at the nation of Israel and believed that there was an invisible covenant community. Some people within the nation of Israel were always faithful; they were the faithful remnant because they had exercised saving faith. Their eternal destinies were secure even when the nation as a whole went through times of terrible judgment from God. This distinction of a redeemed people within the visible covenant community becomes clear in a number of passages in the prophets.

Time and again, the prophets distinguished between Israelites who were merely externally in the visible covenant community from those who genuinely repented and were among the invisible, true believers whose destinies were eternally fixed. For example, in Jeremiah 4:4 we read these words addressed to the visible nation of Judah:

Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, and remove the foreskins of your heart, men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem; lest my wrath go forth like fire (Jeremiah 4:4, RSV).

When Jeremiah ministered to the nation of Judah, all the men of Israel had been physically circumcised. For this reason, they and their families were in the visible covenant community. At the same time, however, Jeremiah knew that the hearts of most of the people of Judah were not right with God. So, he exhorted them to be saved from God's wrath by circumcising their hearts through true faith.

The prophet Ezekiel also illustrates this distinction very clearly. In Ezekiel 18:31, he said this:

Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel? (Ezekiel 18:31).

Ezekiel spoke to people who were physical children of Israel, but this did not mean that they were redeemed people, bound for eternal life. For this reason, the prophet calls for deep sincere repentance of heart.

Whenever we read Old Testament prophets, we must always remember how they understood salvation in relationship to the covenant. To be in covenant was not the same

as being redeemed or eternally saved. When Old Testament prophets categorized people they thought first of the Gentiles, who were outside the visible nation of Israel. These people were lost and without hope, unless they came to Israel and found salvation in her God.

Now the prophets knew that the visible nation of Israel was very special in God's eyes. It consisted of all the physical children of Israel and any Gentiles who had closely associated themselves with the religion of Israel. This visible covenant community had both true believers and unbelievers, but still, it was a community chosen to enjoy the blessings and responsibilities of the covenants with Abraham, Moses, and David. This was the arena within which the people would find salvation.

Beyond this, a third category also dominated the prophets' thinking. The prophets knew that within the nation of Israel was an invisible community. This was the righteous remnant of God's people, the faithful who truly believed. And although they would go through difficult times, and although the remnant was often far from perfect, still, they had trusted Yahweh like Abraham, and they had been made righteous by their faith alone.

CONCLUSION

Whenever we read the prophets we must keep in mind these distinctions: those outside of the covenant, the visible covenant nation, and the invisible covenant people. We can avoid much confusion, and we can gain tremendous insights into the message of the prophets if we never forget these distinctions.

In this lesson, we've touched on a number of themes related to the way that prophets understood the people of the covenant. We've seen that they believed all people were bound to the Lord through covenants with Adam and Noah. But then, Israel had a very special relationship with God because of the covenants with Abraham, Moses, David, and even the new covenant in Christ. And then we've also noticed that the prophets made distinctions that we often don't make. They thought in terms of three kinds of people in the world: those outside the covenant, those unbelievers in the covenant, and then those who were true believers within the covenant. As we remember these distinctions and how the prophets understood the people of God, we will be able to understand and apply the prophetic word to our day as well.

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He Gave Us Prophets

LESSON
THREE

The People of the
Covenant
Faculty Forum



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He Gave Us Prophets

Lesson Three: The People of the Covenant

Faculty Forum

With

Andrew Abernethy, Ph.D.
Dr. Todd Borger
Dr. Bruce L. Fields
Dr. Russell T. Fuller
Rev. Sherif Gendy
Dr. Douglas Gropp
Dr. Carol Kaminski

Pastor Doug McConnell
Dr. Jeffrey J. Niehaus
Dr. Greg Perry
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.
Dr. Mike Ross
Dr. Tim Sansbury
Dr. Imad Shehadeh

Dr. Mark L. Strauss
Dr. David VanDrunen
Dr. Simon Vibert
Dr. Guy Waters
Dr. Stephen J. Wellum

Question 1:

In what ways were God's covenants with Adam and Noah more universal than later covenants?

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

A lot of the time when Christians talk about the “covenant people of God” they have in mind, first, Christians because we’re living in the new covenant period, and we’re in the new covenant in Christ. And if they’re thinking about it a little more deeply than that, they might even say that Israel is the covenant people of God because God made national covenants with Abraham and Moses and David. But you know, in reality, every single human being is in covenant with God. And that’s something we often miss from the Bible. But the Bible lays a foundation for all the special things that God does through Israel, and then later on in the New Testament in the church, and that foundation is the fact that every human being, by virtue of being a human being, is in covenant with God. And we know that this is true because the Bible talks about Adam and Eve being in covenant with God. And we know this is true also because Noah was in covenant with God. Now, what’s unusual about Adam and Eve and Noah? It is the fact that all of the children of the earth come from them, first Adam and Eve and then Noah. And so, what this tells us is that, in a general sense, in a very broad sense, just being a human being means that you are in covenant with God, which means that God shows kindness to you. It means that God requires loyalty, grateful loyalty, from you. And it means there are going to be consequences, as he wishes, as he deems to do it, consequences that are positive blessings and consequences that are negative curses. And these things work out, not just for the special covenant people of God — Israel and the church — but they work out for human beings in general. Every nation on the earth is responsible before God. Every nation on earth has received mercies from God, and every nation on earth receives the consequences of loyalty and disloyalty to God as he pleases to mete them out. And so, it’s very important to realize that the Bible begins its history of God making covenants with people, with covenants in Adam and Noah that apply to every single human being that’s ever lived on the planet.

Dr. Carol Kaminski

As you look at the Old Testament it's important to understand some of the covenants that are at work... So, you have Adam, you have Noah, then Abraham, Mosaic, and Davidic, new covenant. Okay, so that's the big sweep of them. Then some covenants are broader in scope. For example, the Davidic covenant is quite narrow because it's making a promise for a Davidic king. But if you think about what goes on with Adam in the garden — now there's a debate about whether this is actually a covenant or not, but what you clearly have is a command being given to Adam, and there are implications, consequences for him. "If you obey my commandment," he's going to be able to stay there, but if he disobeys, and he eats from the fruit, then there's going to be judgment, and the judgment is death that's going to come, and it will be exile. So, that particular command being given to Adam has widespread significance for the whole Old Testament narrative, because not only is it given to an individual Adam, but the *term* for Adam is also a corporate identity, because the word for humanity is also "*adam*." So, therefore, there is the sense of a corporate identity in individual Adam, which Genesis picks up in a number of ways. One of the ways it does is that it has the pronouns that are used with Adam move between singular and plural in Genesis 1:26-28, Genesis 5:1-3. So, there's that sense of somehow individual Adam represents humanity. You also have the fact that when God says to Adam that "on the day you eat of it you will surely die," that's singular. So, it's referring to a singular Adam, yet the genealogy shows that his descendants die — "and he died... and he died... and he died..." So, that's underscoring the corporate identity of Adam and its implications for humanity. So, it impacts their story. And, of course, we also know from Adam that that narrative not only anticipates Israel's story, but it's also a type of him who was to come. Romans 5 puts it even bigger scale and says not only does it represent humanity, but he is also representing, anticipating, the work of Christ in his obedience, because he's a type of him who was to come. So, it's got enormous significance.

Dr. Mike Ross

In the covenant of grace there are obviously what we would see as more national covenants, like with Abraham and Moses and David, but prior to those there were two, what we would call, "universal covenants" with Adam and then with Noah... So, these two covenants, with Adam and with Noah, make wonderful promises to mankind. The first one is that God will send the seed of a woman, one of Eve's descendants, a human being who will be our Savior; this is the God-man Jesus Christ. And he promises Noah that despite how wicked the world becomes — and it is increasingly becoming more wicked as time goes on — he will never again destroy it with some catastrophic flood or some natural judgment as he did in the days of Noah... So, these two covenants ... look at a much broader audience and a broader work of God in the salvation of the world than even the more national covenants with Abraham and Moses and David.

Question 2: What is the covenant of works?

Dr. David VanDrunen

The covenant of works is a doctrine that was developed in the early centuries of the Reformed theological tradition, and there are several aspects of it that I think can summarize what it was getting at. For one thing, it affirms that at the beginning, when God created man, that he entered into a covenant with him. And so, this covenant of works refers to God's original relationship with Adam. So, what it's affirming is that, just as later in history, God entered into covenant with his people in various ways at various times, so even before the Fall, God actually entered into this special relationship, a covenant relationship, with Adam. So, that's one aspect of this doctrine. A second aspect of this doctrine is captured in that term "works." And what this teaches is that, in this covenant, God required Adam to be obedient and that he was going to deal with Adam according to his obedience or disobedience. And perhaps it's helpful to see this in comparison with how God deals with us his people now. God doesn't offer us salvation, he doesn't offer us eternal life, according to our good works. He offers it to us by faith in Jesus Christ. Well, God didn't go to Adam at the beginning and offer him a mediator, didn't offer him a savior, didn't offer him someone who would do the work for him. What he said to Adam was, "You obey me, and if you don't obey me, you will die," with the implication that if he would obey, he would live. And so that's why it's referred to as the covenant of *works*, because it was based upon the degree of Adam's obedience, or whether or not he would be obedient to God's call. But there's one other aspect of the doctrine that I think is worth mentioning, and that is the idea that God did not originally intend the human race simply to live in the Garden of Eden forever and ever and ever. Now, this is a historic Christian idea. You can go back to Augustine, or John of Damascus, or Thomas Aquinas and you find this conviction that God actually desired to have human beings in his, we might say, in "eschatological fellowship," that he wanted human beings to be with him and rule with him, not only in the first creation but in a new creation. And so, the Reformed doctrine of the covenant of works has ordinarily taught that if Adam had been obedient and had been faithful to the commission that God gave him, that God at some point, in some way, would have blessed him with life in the new creation. He wouldn't have had to die in order to get there, but through that obedience God would have blessed him and blessed all of us in Adam with the blessings of everlasting life.

Dr. Guy Waters

When we talk about the covenant of works, what we mean is that that covenant that God made with Adam operated on a "works" principle — do this and you will live. Or as God put it in the garden, "You are not to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil for on the day that you eat of it you will surely die." That doesn't mean that we could not speak of God's generosity towards Adam in the garden... He placed him in a garden, he gave him run of it to eat of all the trees save one. There was the goodness of God abounding all around him. So, even as we speak

of a covenant of works, we need to stress that that covenant of works was given to Adam by a God who was demonstrating, in many ways and at all times, his goodness towards him.

Dr. Bruce L. Fields

Covenant of works, or what I sometimes refer to as the “Edenic covenant,” is one of these debatable areas in the realm of biblical and systematic theology. I know a theologian who I hold in high regard, Anthony Hoekema, though a Reformed theologian, would speak against the existence of the covenant of works. More recently, Michael Bird in his *Evangelical Theology* would also challenge the concept. Let’s just say I, with all due respect, I do return to the particular section of Genesis, verses 15-17, where the Lord is, kind of, giving a word to Adam to not eat of the Tree of Life, and there I think that, still, we have some basic covenantal framework. For example, I do think that you have essentially two parties there, God and Adam, which a fundamental element of covenant. You do have a stipulation — now mind you, it’s very simple in form, but we would expect that, I think, in Genesis, you see — but the basic stipulation is, don’t eat of the fruit; that there is also in the framework here a kind of promise of reward, though it’s stated in an opposite direction: “God says in the day that you eat of the fruit you shall die.” By implication, what is in play is that if you obey, you will live. And I can’t help but believe that in the particular framework of this encounter, that we can also understand life to be right relation with God, and death, at least initially, to be a broken relationship with God. So, I think you have, at least in a very, very fundamental way, certain characteristics of a covenant — parties, stipulation and the involvement of consequences or rewards if indeed obedience is followed through.

Question 3:

If God promised natural stability in his covenant with Noah, why do we still experience so many natural disasters?

Dr. Tim Sansbury

I think we have to distinguish — as we ask the question, why are there so many natural disasters, given the covenant with Noah that promised stability and promised there would never be a “flood,” really, if we bring it down to the exact words — but to distinguish between the kinds of things that we consider to be natural disasters today and what this biblical flood was... This was not a region of people who were affected. This was an event that affected every living and breathing being on the planet... As we understand Noah standing on the mountain after this event has occurred, he is confronted with, yes, having been saved by God from the flood, but he’s confronted with utter devastation. Everything that he knew, everyone that he knew, all of the world that he understood, it had all been destroyed. And so, while we talk about natural disasters today — and they are significant, and some of them are awful, and we should understand them to be significant and awful, and we should hate them, and we should look forward to a future in which they’re gone — it’s not

fair to call them contrary to the promises made to Noah because these natural disasters are not coming on the heels of sin that is global sin throughout the human race... It's not God taking care or eliminating all but one little tiny remnant and wiping the face of the earth clean of man and beast. And surely plant life as well was totally different than it had ever been. We should then, as we look at the modern issue, while not being concerned that it breaks the covenant with Noah, we should wail, we should be horrified, we should recognize that, in this world in which God has brought stability, that those forces which move the earth and bring us good, at times they also bring us great harm, that the wind and rain which water the plants can also be so extreme that they steal homes and that people lose their life. And so, we can look forward to a future in which those things won't occur. We can recognize them as signs of the curse and as problems that arise only from the Fall, but we don't have to see them as contradictory to God's promises that he has made his people. The flood and the impacts of the flood were far beyond the localized natural disasters that we experience today.

Rev. Sherif Gendy, translation

God, through his covenant with Noah, promised natural stability, yet we still see some natural disasters happen in our day. To answer the question of why we still see disasters, we have to go back to the text itself. We have to return to the covenant God made with Noah. Prior to the covenant, in Genesis 8:21, when Noah came out of the ark and offered a sacrifice to the Lord, it says that:

When the Lord smelled the pleasing aroma, the Lord said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done" (Genesis 8:21).

So, the Lord revealed a clear intention that he would never again strike down every living creature as he did in the flood. In chapter 9, God established his covenant with Noah, and in verses 1 and 2 it says:

And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered" (Genesis 9:1-2).

This mission is similar to the mission God gave to Adam and Eve, to "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." Therefore, God didn't destroy all of mankind or all of the earth through the flood, so that this mission would be fulfilled. The earth would be filled with the knowledge of the Lord, and Noah and his decedents would be fruitful and produce children who would know the Lord and worship and glorify him. Within the context of the covenant, in 9:11, it says:

I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth (Genesis 9:11).

Two times here, God asserts that there will never again be a flood that destroys the earth or destroys “all flesh.” The main idea is that the earth will never again be destroyed by the waters of a flood. Finally, the Lord says:

I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh (Genesis 9:13-15).

So, three times the Lord asserts that humanity will never again be destroyed by the waters of the flood. The words here are very specific and very clear. It doesn't promise that there will never be any other types of disasters, such as earthquakes and volcanoes. There's no promise that those things won't happen. The language is very specific; there will never again be a flood that destroys the entire earth and every living creature.

Today, natural disasters still happen, but not in the same way that God accomplished his judgment in Noah's day. We still experience earthquakes and volcanoes because all of creation is groaning from the sin and corruption that man brought on earth by his rebellion, because of the curse of sin that man brought by his transgression against the Lord. We read in Romans 8:20-23 that all of creation groans. But the time is coming when the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption, and we will never again see any sort of anger, the anger and the groaning of creation. When Christ returns, the curse will be lifted from the earth, and the earth will be restored to the beautiful and good form that the Lord created it to have in the beginning. But in the present time, we experience the manifestation of the groaning of the creation because of man's corruption and the curse. And this doesn't contradict God's promise to Noah that he will never again destroy all creation by the waters of a flood.

Pastor Doug McConnell

Well, God did make a promise that seedtime and harvest and the rains would come and all of that to Noah, but in the background of that story, what had just happened was, he had flooded the earth. He had destroyed the earth with water so that nothing was left alive except for those that were in the ark and the animals with them. And so, the promise specifically was that he would not destroy the world with a flood... We do have regular seasons; we don't have a worldwide catastrophe like what had happened in Noah's day. But I think it's important that we understand that there is a connection between the earth and men who live upon it. The earth was put under dominion of mankind, and because of it, the earth feels the weight — as it says in

Isaiah — of our sin... And of course, the Bible does talk about the lifting of the curse on the earth, doesn't it? Both in the Old Testament prophets it talks about a day when the deserts would blossom and bloom, and Paul reaffirms this in Romans 8, and he talks about the creation itself, as it were, on tiptoes waiting for the revelation of the sons of God, when the curse will be lifted from the earth. And so, we live in this era when the ground is still cursed, and I think it's interesting to know that, or understand that Jesus wore a crown of thorns because he bears the curse that was upon the earth, and when things are made right in the regeneration, that curse will be lifted from the earth and deserts will all blossom. And that's a day to look forward to.

Question 4:

How can people today serve as God's image and live out his mandate to fill the earth and rule over it?

Dr. Greg Perry

This incredible mandate that the Lord gives to Adam and to Eve that they would bear God's image by multiplying that image in the world and then taking dominion over the earth, extending the borders of the garden throughout the whole earth, is a mandate that continues and that has been renewed and redeemed by our Lord Jesus Christ. We see in the Great Commission — this commission to go into all the nations and to preach the gospel, the good news about the kingdom of God coming through Christ's death and resurrection — but he talks there about teaching them to obey all the things that I've commanded you, and it deals with all areas of life. If we read back through the Gospel of Matthew we see that Jesus taught about money, that he taught about how to relate to the poor, how to relate to the Samaritans, people who weren't of the same race, for example. And we're reminded that this commission — sometimes called the “cultural mandate,” in Genesis 1 and 2 — indicates that all of life is sacred; every dimension of life, family life, business life, our life as citizens. Indeed, Moses uses the language that God put them in the garden “to serve and to keep it.” It's the same language that he will use again in Numbers 3 to talk about the Levites and how they are to care for the tabernacle. And so, the Bible knows no distinction between “sacred” and “secular.” All of life comes under the reign of God. And this incredible *cultural* mandate is that we will create and make culture in a way that shows the Creator and how God made the world and intended for us to relate to him, each other, and to the world. Well, as we follow Jesus in every area of life, Paul picks up this language in Ephesians 4 and Colossians 3 and he talks about putting on the new self, the new humanity, and it's very Adamic language. It's referring back to the original mandate that was given to Adam and to Eve. And so, as we read through Ephesians 4 and Colossians 3, we see Paul discipling the Ephesians and the Colossians in every area of life — “Whatever you do, do it as unto the Lord and not unto men.” And so, we continue to carry out that cultural mandate as we follow Jesus and make disciples in every dimension of life.

Pastor Doug McConnell

Well, that mandate to fill the earth, subdue it and to rule over it was one that was given to Adam in the beginning, the creation mandate, and it was reaffirmed again to Noah later on when humanity started again, as it were... I think it's important we understand that God's intent was to fill the world with those who bear the image of God to the glory of God. And it's interesting because in Hebrews ... when it talks about this mandate and man and his place, and the Son of Man, Jesus, and it talks about the subduing of the earth, and it says, now we don't see it, but we do see Jesus who is our "author and the perfecter of our faith," who has gone ahead of time to do this. And so, I think there is going to be a final subduing of the earth through Christ, the second Adam, and he is going to fill the earth with those who bear the image of God to the glory of God. But in the meantime, we do that to the degree that we spread the gospel and bring people into glad and willing obedience to Jesus.

Question 5:**Why are God's covenants with Abraham, Moses and David understood to be more national in character?****Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

In his wisdom, God decided that he was going to work through one particular ethnic group and reach all of humanity through that group. And that group, of course, was the nation of Israel. The nation of Israel in many respects was like the "A" team, like the first-string team of the human race, not because they were better than anybody else, but because of God's mercy toward their father, Abraham. And one of the ways in which God treated Israel special and prepared them for this role of reaching all the world with the good news, with reaching out and spreading the kingdom of God throughout all of the nations of the earth, was that he made covenants with particular people, with representative people in the nation of Israel. The first of those was with Abraham, of course, the father of the whole nation. He made covenant with Abraham and that covenant basically told what Israel's role was and what God was going to do to make sure that they were able to fulfill that role and what responsibilities they had and what kind of consequences they faced as they would be faithful and unfaithful to him, those sorts of things, the normal sorts of things you find in a covenant. But then, later on, what God did was he reaffirmed and furthered that national covenant with Abraham by turning to the next big figure in the history of Israel, which of course is Moses, the one who delivered them from Egypt. And this too was a national covenant, this covenant that God made at Sinai. He gathered them around Sinai and he said, "You are a royal priesthood. You're a kingdom of priests. You're my treasured possession. You are mine. Now here is my great gift to you — the covenant of law." Not a condemnation of them. It was not given to them to mess them up or to tell them how they were going to be failing, but rather, initially, it was given to them as a source of life — "Trust in the Lord and do good, and you shall dwell in the land and you will be fed." You see, the law was given to them for goodness, for hope, for life, as the apostle Paul says even, in Romans 7. And then, after the days of Abraham,

of course, as the nation of Israel was moving forward and becoming a kingdom that would then spread the kingdom of God throughout the world, the next big step was when God ordained that a particular family would be the dynasty that would rule over Israel forever, and that of course was the family of David. So, God made covenant with David as well. And when he made covenant with David, he promised that this was going to be the royal family, not just the royal family of Israel, but the royal family that would one day rule over every tribe and every nation on the earth, so that the Son of David would one day reign over every square inch of the entire planet. That was the kind of covenant dream that Israel had, that even from the days of Abraham, that they would one day become a blessing to all the nations. And this happened because God was making covenants with his people, with the nation of Israel. And, of course, we know that Israel failed many, many times, and God was patient with them all through this process, but they failed miserably after this covenant with David. Even David's own house failed miserably. And as a result, Israel went through a period of discipline, a period of judgment — we often call it the “exile period” — and it extended for hundreds and hundreds of years until that great Son of David came, that great “second Moses,” that great son of Abraham came, and his name was Jesus. But all of this has to do with the nation of Israel, the nation of Israel as the means by which God would reach the world. And, even as New Testament believers, we know that this is true. Our Savior is Jewish. His apostles were Jewish. So, even the whole church of Jesus Christ is built on the foundation of Israel. And Gentiles, as they come in, they are adopted into this family of Israel, and so these national covenants given to Israel are not just for Israel, but they are vital to our faith in Jesus as well.

Dr. Mike Ross

God's covenant of grace is one huge covenant. It lasts from Genesis 3 and the fall of mankind to the very end of history, but it unfolds progressively in stages. When we come to Abraham, and then followed by Moses and David, you have this covenant of *promise* with Abraham, the covenant of the *law* with Moses, and the covenant of the *kingdom* with David, God is kind of narrowing down his covenantal focus to a specific people, Israel, the Jews, the Hebrews... And so, he's forming this covenant more and more around this people, stronger and stronger to kind of hedge these people in so that they are not defiled by the nations around them, by their idolatry and immorality and wicked ways. That's why these prophets come along, and they speak very forcefully about the way Israel has been polluted by these things. They're not just concerned about the spiritual welfare of the Old Testament people; they're concerned about the Christ who will be born... So, this covenant of grace focuses down on this people of Israel for the sake of Jesus Christ, and then after he has died and risen from the grave, this covenant opens up again into the new covenant and expands to the ends of the earth. So, you kind of see this broad covenant with Adam and Noah, narrowing down to the phases of the covenant with Abraham and Moses and David, and then opening up again, almost like an hourglass, to take in the nations of the world. And that's why they're very nationalistic. They're rooted in Hebrew life and laws. They're rooted in the temple. They're dependent upon the kingship of David in particular because this is the time in which God is creating a special

incubator into which will be born ... Jesus Christ, for the sake of the whole world eventually.

Question 6:

How did Old Testament prophets depend on Moses' covenant?

Dr. Carol Kaminski

When we look at the message of the Prophets, we don't want to think of a prophet as bringing out a lot of new ideas. They're not creative. They're going back to the Mosaic covenant, and they're going back to the terms of the covenant. And so, what's very interesting is when you look at certain prophets you will find certain terms only appear in an Old Testament book and then in the prophet. For example, in the prophet Ezekiel, he will use language from Leviticus 26 to describe the coming judgment. And some terms are only in Leviticus 26 and in Ezekiel, and it's showing that clear connection between the two and really saying, for Ezekiel, Leviticus in particular was the grid — of course, Ezekiel is a priest — so it's the grid through which he's describing both the judgment and the hope of restoration. You could look at Jeremiah. Jeremiah's going back to Deuteronomy often, and he's appealing — I mean, he quotes Deuteronomy 27 in one of his classic passages in Jeremiah 11 — he quotes it directly and he says, the law says, "cursed is anyone who does not keep all the things written in the law," and he is reading this and says, "Remember what Moses had commanded you. " And so, their vocabulary is coming from the Mosaic covenant, their categories about how they're describing it. And it also helps us, because when we read like about locusts, or when we read about some, "You will be as dung on the face of the earth," or "You're going to be eaten by the birds," when we're reading the Prophets, you sort of think, okay, what is that all about? Going back to the curse language of the Mosaic covenant helps us to understand the context of it and not read these prophetic books in isolation from the Old Testament narrative.

Dr. Todd Borger

The Old Testament prophets had a good view of time so that they were able to look to the past, they were able to live in the present, and then look ahead to the future. The prophets depended on God's covenant, in particular I'll say the Mosaic covenant. Let's kind of confine it to that. So, if we're talking about God's law that he gave at Sinai, for instance, that law that he gave provided the basis, the foundation for everything that the prophets were teaching the people. One of the problems that we see in the Prophets — and this has been a problem with critical scholars for, you know, well over a hundred years — is the fact that many of the prophets don't refer specifically to specific laws. We get some of that in Jeremiah where he seems to list off some of the Ten Commandments at times, but we don't get them just having these explicit discussions about the law at Sinai. And so, for many liberal scholars ... that has created problems. But if we look at it instead that they have the law at Sinai, that they assumed that all of their readers, all of their listeners, knew that, then we can look at this in a bit of a different light because now we have the prophets speaking to

the people. They've got God's covenant. It's assumed that this is their basis for life. This is their basis for understanding the relationship with God, for instance. They can, then, preach to the people about the present situation, having that foundation in the past. This past, present and future terminology, I think, is helpful also with the prophets because what we're seeing is that the prophets were not just future fortune tellers. They didn't just tell things that happened in the future, but instead they were looking to the past; they saw God's acts, the things that he did on behalf of Israel in the past. They had that as a foundation for what they then preached to the people about their present situation. But then also, they were always looking ahead to the future, to what God was going to do in the future, perhaps through judgment, more often through restoration, through salvation of his people. And so, this view of the prophets as having a past perspective to the covenants, a present perspective where they preach to the people to that age, and then a future view to what God was going to do in the future is very important to understanding the prophets.

Dr. Douglas Gropp

Probably the most important passage for understanding the role of the prophets in the Old Testament is Deuteronomy 18:15-18, where Moses — reminiscing with the Israelites on the making of the first covenant at Mount Sinai, which he mediated — says that the Lord will raise up a prophet “like me” ... and he's saying that future prophets are going to be in this same mediatorial role in relationship to this covenant that was made at Horeb, or as it says in the book of Exodus, the covenant made at Mount Sinai. The shape of the prophetic speeches, particularly the judgment speeches, which have often been called “covenant lawsuits,” are bringing to bear on Israel the actual terms of the covenant that the Lord made with Israel at Mount Sinai and renewed after Israel broke the covenant immediately with the sin of the golden calf, and broke the covenant again when they rebelled in the wilderness, when they heard the report of the spies coming back from the Promised Land in Numbers 13 and 14. That covenant was renewed in the book of Deuteronomy on the plains of Moab as a renewal of essentially the same covenant.

Question 7:

Why did God choose David's royal line to be a permanent dynasty in Israel?

Dr. Russell T. Fuller

Even from the beginning it was already chosen, God had already chosen Judah to be the tribe where... The rulers were going to come from Judah. And so, God had already chosen that. Now, originally the first king, though, was not chosen from there but chosen from Benjamin — Saul. And he looked like the king. He would have been, for Hollywood casting, it would have been Saul. He was taller than everyone, and when you look at him, that's the way a king should look. But God said, “but man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks on the inward heart.” And what it says about David is that David was “a man after God's own heart.” That's why he

chose him. And then the Scriptures also said that David's heart was fully after the Lord; he was fully dedicated to the Lord in every way. And so, he wanted to build God a house. But when Nathan the prophet came back to him, God's response was, "I'm going to build *you* a house, and it's going to be an eternal house." And by "house" there, he wasn't talking about a temple. He was talking about an eternal dynasty. And even in Old Testament times they understood that, not that there was just going to be one king after another. Even just a few hundred years after David, under the prophet Isaiah, it was understood that this eternal dynasty was going to be through Messiah. So, Messiah would come through David. But if you notice, every king after David, he's basically compared to David, and they'll say, "He did right in the eyes God, but he didn't fully follow after the Lord, like their father David did." So, David is the great example of what a king should be, and again, it's because of David's heart toward the Lord. He was fully obedient toward God, and so this is why his house was chosen forever. And even though there's a warning that, if your sons disobey, I will punish them; for your sake, you will always have a person sitting upon the throne. And again, that was going to be seen as Messiah ultimately.

Andrew Abernethy, Ph.D.

When we think about the human kingship within ancient Israel, and we often think of, say, the term "Messiah" and how the Old Testament is filled with these great messianic hopes, what we need to keep in mind is that the Messiah, or the one anointed to serve in a really important role in God's kingdom, is actually an agent of God himself... So, quite clearly the expectation is that the human king would be obeying God as the divine king. Now, when we look at the reign of King David, it's remarkable that as soon as he is anointed as king over all of Israel... One of the first things he does is establish a capital city. And in that capital city, Jerusalem, the next move that David makes is, he has the ark of the covenant be brought to Jerusalem, and of course this happens with a great procession. And the ark of the covenant symbolizes God as king within Israel. So, by moving the ark of the covenant to the very center of the capital city of Israel and Judah, what we find is that the vision for Israel is that God himself is the one who's their king who should reign at the center of their entire nation. But this king, God, also has chosen to work with a Davidic king, and that's closely connected with David, where we see in the very next chapter after the ark of the covenant has been brought to Jerusalem, God promises that he will remain faithful to the line of David until the end of time.

Question 8:

How is the new covenant similar to and different from the covenants of the Old Testament?

Dr. Greg Perry

In Jeremiah 31, as we read about God's incredible promise to bring his people back into the land and to make a new covenant with the household of Judah and of Israel, we recognize echoes of language that we've heard before. In chapters 30–33, there's

also this promise that David's son will once again sit on the throne. And so, the Davidic covenant is very clearly echoed there. And then, of course, the idea that God will put his law in the hearts of his people, that he will cleanse them, as we hear in the language of Ezekiel 36, which is also referring to this new covenant. And so, the Mosaic covenant is clearly echoed there. And then, of course, in the language of Isaiah and in the language of Ezekiel's reckoning of God's name, vindication of God's name to the nations — this idea that his people will once again be a light to the nations, be a blessing to the nations — well, that's very clearly referring to Abrahamic language. And then, of course, Isaiah and others also talk about even the whole earth being renewed and springing forth with new life. And so, the covenant with Adam in creation and with Noah is also very clearly echoed in Jeremiah 30–33 and other passages in the Prophets that refer to the new covenant or this “eternal covenant of peace,” as Isaiah puts it. But, also, we have very clearly new things that are happening. There are things that are really *new* “new” about the new covenant. We hear that this new covenant will be constituted, not by law-giving as it was on Mount Sinai, but by the giving of God's Spirit. And so, Spirit-giving, instead of law-giving, will constitute this new covenant. We also read that God will remember the sins of his people no more, that there will be a definitive dealing with sin, that God will make it so that this new covenant cannot be broken as it was in the past because sin will be definitively dealt with. We also read in passages like Ezekiel 34, and this word comes up in Jeremiah as well, that God will shepherd his own people himself, that the breaking of the old covenant was such that even the leaders of God's people have been corrupt. And so, the Lord himself will shepherd his people. That's going to be new. And then, lastly, we see that there's going to be such a knowledge of the Lord all throughout the people of God and all throughout creation, this extensive knowledge of God, that people won't even have to teach one another about the Lord. And so, we see that this new covenant is also going to constitute a new creation, a thoroughgoing knowledge of the Lord throughout all the world. So, there are things that are very similar about the Old Testament covenants; we hear the languages echoed. But there are these things that are also very new about the new covenant.

Dr. Carol Kaminski

So, as we start to interpret the new covenant it is helpful to understand a little bit about the old covenants, because when Jeremiah announces the days are coming when God will cut a new covenant, he says, it's not like the old one that they broke. So, somehow you've got to understand the new covenant, and you've got to know what the old one is. And he's really referring back to the Mosaic covenant, and we usually... There are other covenants in the Old Testament, but we often think about the contrast between Mosaic covenant and new covenant. The new covenant language is found in the book of Jeremiah, in Jeremiah 31. Jeremiah is living under the old covenant. That's the time. And not only is he living under the old covenant, but King Josiah has been renewing the old covenant... And of course, the covenant that Jeremiah announces, it also says that the days are coming when God will “cut” a covenant. We use the language of “making,” but the Hebrew is “cut.” The Hebrew term “cut” implies the death of an animal ... right? To make a covenant you cut an animal, and Jeremiah is not explaining how this is going to happen, but he does use

the language of cutting a covenant, suggesting blood. And of course, when Jesus at his last supper says, “Behold the blood of the new covenant,” and it’s *his* own blood that is going to inaugurate the new covenant, which is just a wonderful, wonderful gift of seeing what Jesus does in terms of inaugurating this new era. And then, if we look at it as Christians today, we’re not under the old covenant. Of course, Hebrews talks about this, Hebrews 8 and 9. We’re not under the old, the old is fading away, but we are under the new covenant, which is through Jesus, offering forgiveness for our sins — wonderful that we enter by faith and trust in Jesus who is the one who inaugurates. He’s the mediator of the new covenant, and he inaugurates it. So, it’s wonderful that we’re living in this time rather than living under the Old Testament and under the old covenant.

Dr. Jeffrey J. Niehaus

One thing to remember about all of the divine human covenants is that the Lord initiated them all. Another thing is that they are all gracious acts because they’re gifts. They wouldn’t exist if the Lord hadn’t given them. They are also all conditional in some sense or other. Even the first man and woman had a condition. They had commands to obey; they had something that they were not to disobey, namely eating the fruit of the tree. And as you proceed on through Scripture, probably the most important two to consider are the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant. And the Mosaic covenant, again, it wouldn’t have existed if the Lord hadn’t given it, so it is a work of grace, but also it has conditions, and everybody knows this. The new covenant is also, of course, a wonderful gift. We are called to the obedience of faith... As Paul said, the law is holy and gracious and good, but ... the problem is that the law, the Mosaic covenant, gave you God’s standards, but it didn’t give you the power to obey them. And that’s what you get in the new covenant. So, you get these promises even in the Old Testament, the old covenant material. Ezekiel 36:27 says at some future date — open-ended — I will put my Spirit in you and move you to obey my laws and decrees... But in Romans, Paul can speak of the circumcision of the heart, which is by the Spirit. And of course, the great passage in Jeremiah 31 where the Lord promises that he will write his law on their hearts, and that’s what happens in the new covenant also by the Spirit. So, that’s the tremendous difference between those two covenants. And of course, God’s whole covenantal program after the Fall onwards is moving toward that new covenant.

Question 9:

What did God intend to convey to the nation of Israel through Hosea’s marriage to Gomer and their children’s names?

Dr. Carol Kaminski

So, in the book of Hosea, God is really trying to communicate his message to his people through Hosea’s marriage as well as the children’s names. And so, the marriage is representing this forsaking for other gods as his wife is forsaking him and for the sake of other lovers. That’s kind of the imagery that’s being used. But you also

have it with these children. I mean, you have the first son being born called “Jezreel.” Now, Jezreel, we might not know much about that name and think, you know, it’s just an ordinary name, but if you’re an Israelite and you’re in the northern kingdom, this is a powerful term that’s being used because it recalls key events that have happened in the northern kingdom, especially with King Ahab and Jezebel. And it recalls this event where Ahab had wanted this man’s vineyard — Naboth — wanted his vineyard, and he wasn’t able to get the vineyard, and so his wife Jezebel organizes these two false witnesses and basically has the guy killed, and then Ahab takes the vineyard. And this is all taking place at Jezreel. And so, that happens there. There are several other events that happened at Jezreel, like terrible bloodshed that happens, including Jezebel getting killed, as well as Ahab’s seventy sons and their heads get cut off and sent to Jezreel. So, as soon as you hear the word “Jezreel,” it is bringing up these terrible events, and it is announcing God’s judgment for what took place at Jezreel. And then you have two other terms... And you have the first one being Lo-Ruhamah is in Hebrew or “no compassion.” I mean this is a terrible term when you think of it because God says he’s no longer going to have compassion on his people. This picking up that there’s going to be an exile coming; they’ve been worshipping idols since 930 B.C., so this means for almost 200 years they’ve been worshipping idols and God hasn’t destroyed them because of his compassion. So, when he says, “Lo-Ruhamah,” he’s really pronouncing that judgment is coming and he’s withdrawing his compassion. And then the last term, the last name is “Lo-Ammi,” which means “not my people.” And then again, this is very significant to the heart of the covenant relationship God made with Abraham — Genesis 17, “I will be your God; you will be my people.” You think of it in the Mosaic covenant: “I will be your God, you will be my people.” Now he’s saying through this third child, Lo-Ammi, “You are no longer my people.” And in fact, he’s going to treat them like they’re not his people. He’s going to treat them like the nations, and so judgment’s coming. I will mention that immediately after he says, Lo-Ammi, not my people, there is going to be hope that at the place where he said “not my people” they will be called “children of the living God” — wonderful little nugget of hope in the midst of that — and Paul’s going to pick this up in Romans to say that this is the hope of the Gentiles coming in. So, you have judgment being pronounced but also this little window of hope of the future restoration.

Rev. Sherif Gendy, translation

The message God intended to convey through Hosea’s marriage and his children was to illustrate to the people of Israel the covenant relationship between God and his people. God entered into a covenant relationship through which he took the initiative to show mercy and benevolence to his people. But, just as Hosea’s wife was unfaithful and an adulteress, the people were unfaithful in their relationship with God. They were worshipping other gods and committing various sins that kindled the Lord’s wrath. The names of Hosea’s children, in particular, demonstrated God’s judgment against sin, the people’s sin. Each time Gomer bore Hosea a boy or a girl, the severity of the judgment gradually increased. For instance, we read about the first son Gomer bore in Hosea 1:4, where it says:

And the Lord said to him, “Call his name Jezreel, for in just a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel” (Hosea 1:4).

Actually, there are at least two reasons behind choosing the name Jezreel. The first reason is that it sounds similar to Israel in pronunciation — yiz-RAH-eel and YIZ-rah-eel. The other reason is that there was a valley in Israel called the valley of Jezreel. This valley is associated with many bloody events. We read about it, for example, in Judges 6:33 and 1 Samuel 29:1. Also, the name Jezreel is related to the story of Ahab and Jezebel and the killing of Naboth. We can find this in 1 Kings 21. We also read about it in the killing of Ahab’s family through Jehu the son of Jeshoshaphat in 2 Kings 10:11. Actually, there is a very important passage in 2 Kings 10:28-31 that, although Jehu son of Jeshoshaphat obeyed God’s command and killed the family of Ahab, he did that for his own personal purposes and ambitions. That is why the Lord said in the book of Hosea: “I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel.” We read in 2 Kings 10, beginning with verse 28:

Thus Jehu wiped out Baal from Israel. But Jehu did not turn aside from the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel to sin — that is, the golden calves that were in Bethel and in Dan. And the Lord said to Jehu, “Because you have done well in carrying out what is right in my eyes, and have done to the house of Ahab according to all that was in my heart, your sons of the fourth generation shall sit on the throne of Israel.” But Jehu was not careful to walk in the law of the Lord, the God of Israel, with all his heart. He did not turn from the sins of Jeroboam, which he made Israel to sin (2 Kings 10:28-31).

Although Jehu destroyed the altars of the Baals, he erected idols and walked in the sins of Jeroboam. That is why Hosea’s first son stands for the judgment of God on the Israelites, for the bloody events that were related to Jezreel, especially against the house of Jehu, and for the corrupt religious and behavioral practices that were in the kingdom at that time. The second child, the daughter, whom Gomer bore to Hosea, was called “Lo-Ruhamah.” We read about her in Hosea 1:6:

She conceived again and bore a daughter. And the Lord said to him, “Call her name No Mercy, for I will no more have mercy on the house of Israel, to forgive them at all” (Hosea 1:6).

The name “Lo-Ruhamah” in Hebrew means “no mercy.” The Lord declared that he would remove his mercy from the people of Israel. Mercy, here, is related to the covenant faithfulness of the Lord. So, the Lord here says that he will remove his mercy from the midst of the people. We read about the last child that Gomer bore Hosea in verses 8 and 9:

When she had weaned No Mercy, she conceived and bore a son. And the Lord said, “Call his name Not My People, for you are not my people, and I am not your God” (Hosea 1:8-9).

The Hebrew name “Lo-Ammi” means “not my people.” This was the highest level and the hardest of the Lord’s judgments. Within the covenant, God had entered into a relationship in which he adopted Israel as his people, and he was their God. Through this covenant, he declared his name to Moses saying, “*ehyeh asher ehyeh*” or “I am who I am.” So God, through Hosea’s last child, was saying to Israel, “You are not my people” — “Lo-Ammi.” Moreover, he said, “I am not your God.” In Hebrew, “I am not” is the reversal of his covenant name that he declared to Moses. He was saying, “I am not,” or “*not ehyeh*.” I will not be your covenant God. Thus, Hosea’s marriage and children illustrate how God dealt with his covenant people. He declared his judgment over the people because of their sins and because they had acted contrary to the conditions of the covenant, conditions that required their loyalty in response to the covenant mercy and grace that God had initiated and shown them.

Question 10: **What is the invisible church?**

Dr. Simon Vibert

The invisible church is the church that’s made up of those who are known only to God as true believers — “the elect,” as we might sometimes call them — those who will be part of the visible church, but of course, those who God knows are his. And they will be regular worshipers in the kind of congregations that are made up of the visible church, but they are the ones who God knows are eternally saved.

Dr. Mark L. Strauss

The “invisible church,” then, refers to all the true followers of Jesus Christ, all those that have been justified through faith in God’s grace, God’s gift of salvation through Jesus Christ, and have come into a relationship with him. We form a worldwide community connected together by the Holy Spirit. All those who are true followers of Jesus Christ around the world, whatever their denomination, whether their a member of particular denomination or not, all true followers of Jesus Christ make up the invisible church. You could even call it the “true church,” that is the true people of God in this world.

Dr. Stephen J. Wellum

In Christian theology, we’ve often spoken of the visible and invisible church. These terms can be very, very helpful, but they can also differ depending upon our theological backgrounds and heritages and our theological commitments. “Invisible church” probably is the term that is less disputed from among individual Christians, and it refers primarily to the fact that the church is universal. We cannot see all believers at one time because they are not only from the remnant and the people in the

Old Testament, but also in the New Testament era of all times, all places. So we speak of Christ's universal body, his people that encompasses all those various times and places, and "invisible" is a good term that refers to that.

Question 11:

Why did the prophets so frequently call Israel to "circumcise their hearts" to the Lord?

Dr. Russell T. Fuller

The prophets did frequently call on Israel to "circumcise their heart" to the Lord. You see the first time in the Pentateuch where Moses commands them to circumcise their own heart. And, of course, when you think about it, that's an impossibility. How can a person circumcise their own heart, you see? ... And so, if you look at Deuteronomy it'll talk about "circumcise your heart," and then just a few verses later what it's going to say is that *God* will circumcise our heart. And so, that was what was needed in the Old Testament. Remember, in the Old Testament, the law was given upon stones. It was given externally. The key for the Old Testament was, how do you internalize it? The way to internalize the law is being described by the term "circumcision of the heart." Now, we know circumcision was the great symbol and seal of the covenant of the Old Testament. But yet, what it really represented was the work of the Holy Spirit in one's heart and what we would call today "regeneration." Therefore, we become willing and able to try to obey God's law, not perfectly, but yet, with the Holy Spirit's help in a way that is acceptable to the Lord.

Dr. Imad Shehadeh, translation

A marvelous thing in God's relationship with the ancient people is the Ten Commandments, but we also see that Scripture gives another side of God, which does not exist in other religions or in common human thought. It talks about the "circumcision of the heart." This means that, even at the time God gave the Ten Commandments, there was another dimension, the circumcision of the heart. In other words, it is the need for the heart to be changed. For instance, if we read in Deuteronomy — which is the conclusion of what Moses did with the people and how he revealed God and the Ten Commandments — Moses conveys, in Deuteronomy 30:6, this promise from God:

The Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring (Deuteronomy 30:6).

It means that God is working. The Lord will perform surgery on your heart. In the New Testament, we call this "regeneration." And why? So that you will love the Lord your God,

And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live (Deuteronomy 30:6).

This is the same language that Jeremiah used when he said that God would write the law on our hearts. It is no longer just written on stones but written on hearts. This is the circumcision of the heart. This means that here, in the midst of God's words concerning the required commands that require complete obedience, God says, "You are incapable of doing this if I don't change your heart." This means that the human need is not to have more knowledge. Our need is not to know the law more and the laws of "do's" and "do not's"; we know these. Our problem is that we need a new nature, and this is the circumcision of the heart. That is why the command says to circumcise your heart. In other words, confess that you are incapable, that you need the work of God in your heart. When I say, "circumcise your heart," it means that you need to go to someone else to do it for you. You can't do it by yourself. Of course, this happens; this is the foundation of the message of the gospel, through the cross of Christ.

Pastor Doug McConnell

I find it interesting that in the New Testament when Jesus encounters Nicodemus and mentions being "born again," he seems befuddled by the question or the comment that Jesus makes. But Jesus, in his rebuke to him, mild as it was, suggested that he *should* know that. And yet, the idea of being born again is not mentioned in the Old Testament, but what is mentioned is being circumcised of heart, a heart change that's necessary in order to fulfill what God wants in his commandments. And, of course, the commands can come to us, but they don't give us a desire to keep them. And so, the command to circumcise their heart was to recognize that the real problem was their heart condition, their love for things other than God and his glory. And so, it was really a call to conversion, and as long as that did not happen, it was never going to be that Israel would be the nation, the people would be the people that God had called them to be. And so we learn in Moses, in his last address to the people, tells them that despite all the miracles they had seen, all the things God had done for them, they still did not believe because the Lord had not given them a heart to believe. But then it goes on to say that their children, the ones that they thought God would bring into the Promised Land and have them slaughtered, he would actually circumcise their heart so that they would believe. And you read God, in the Prophets, will look back at that first generation that was in the desert as a faithful generation, and evidently it was because God had circumcised their hearts. And so, that's what's needed in the old covenant, and in the new covenant it's talked about in terms of being "born again."

Dr. Greg Perry

Sometimes we think that circumcision was really only something that the Jews practiced, but if you go into the British Museum, you'll see that circumcision was a very common practice throughout the ancient Near East. It was a practice that was mainly associated with dealing with fertility issues, making it possible to have more children by removing the barrier between husband and wife, removing the foreskin.

But the Lord calls his people to circumcise their hearts because this is the symbol of his covenant with them, the covenant he gave to Abraham to circumcise himself and to circumcise his sons and every male servant in his household as a sign of his loyalty to the great king, the Lord. And God's people, though, like all of us, would grow insensitive to the Lord, would create barriers in their relationship with the Lord, and so the Lord reminds them to remove those barriers, to re-sensitize their hearts in order to have fruitful lives under his reign. And so, in Deuteronomy 10, we see God in the giving of the law as they go into the land say, "circumcise your hearts." And then in Deuteronomy 30, at the end of this covenant ceremony, we see the Lord remind them again to live lives where they're constantly removing the barriers between them and the Lord and wanting to be fruitful in their life in the land. But it's interesting, Deuteronomy 30 sort of foreshadows something that's going to come, and that is that God's people will fall away from the Lord, and they'll have to be removed from the land. And yet the Lord says, "*I will circumcise your hearts.*" There's this shift in Deuteronomy 30 from their responsibility to do that in their daily lives and yet that the Lord will do that for them as well. And we see that even in the new covenant that God will put his Spirit in our hearts, give us a new heart, a sensitive heart of flesh, and remove the heart of stone. So, the language of circumcision is a very strong reminder of the covenant sign and also of the situation we face as human beings that we need to constantly tend to our hearts before God, removing those obstacles, so that we can live fruitful lives as God's people.

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He Gave Us Prophets

LESSON
FOUR

DYNAMICS OF THE COVENANTS



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He Gave Us Prophets

Lesson Four

Dynamics of the Covenants

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever noticed that human relationships have their ups and downs? Friendships are sometimes enjoyable and other times not enjoyable. Sometimes they're secure and other times insecure. We've seen in previous lessons that the prophets of the Old Testament were emissaries of God's covenant with his people, and to understand this emissarial function, we have to understand that the prophets realized that the relationship between Israel and God had its ups and its downs.

We've entitled this lesson the "Dynamics of the Covenants." In this lesson, we are going to look at three different topics: First, we will explore the covenant ideals. And second, we'll examine covenant judgment — how did the prophets minister on God's behalf when the people fell under divine judgment? And then third, we're looking to covenant blessings — how did prophets speak of blessings that God offered to his people? Grasping these dynamics of covenant life will help us understand Old Testament prophecy and how it applies to the church and the world today. What were the basic ideals of covenant life with Yahweh?

COVENANT IDEALS

Have you ever been to a wedding and heard all the wonderful things that the bride and groom say to each other? "To have and to hold, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer." Wouldn't it be strange to hear the bride and groom begin their marriages with vows that were less than ideal? Can you imagine hearing the man say to the woman, "I take you to be my wife, but it's really going to be hard to hold on if you get sick"? Or can you imagine the woman saying to the man, "I'll take you as my husband, but you'd better not let us get poor"? Well, we would wonder what was wrong with a couple who spoke like that to each other on their wedding day because we expect the beginning of a marriage to focus on ideals. It's a fresh relationship. It's a time when things are just like they're supposed to be. We all hope that the couple will remember the things they said to each other when the relationship was ideal.

Well, the prophets of the Old Testament knew something like this was true of the relationship between God and his people. They understood that there were certain ideals of the covenant relationship between God and Israel. Now to understand this ideal relationship, we have to look at two subjects: first, the basic ideal covenant structures; and then secondly, the prophetic ministries, or how the prophets relied on these structures.

COVENANT STRUCTURES

In earlier lessons, we saw that the Old Testament describes Yahweh's covenants with Israel as if they are patterned around the Ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaties. In the times of the Old Testament, great emperors would enter into treaties or covenants with smaller nations, and the Bible says that Yahweh entered into such a covenant with the nation of Israel. When emperors first entered into covenant treaties with their vassal nations, they began by declaring certain ideals that formed the basic structures of their political arrangements.

At least two components always appear in suzerain-vassal treaties. In the first place, Ancient Near Eastern treaties always affirmed the benevolence of the emperor toward his vassals. They declared the name of the great king and began with an historical account that enumerated all the great things the king had done for his people. Treaties were always based on the kindness of the emperor, and this theme of kindness from the emperor is true also in the Bible's ideal of covenant. The center of every divine covenant in the Bible was God's kindness toward his people.

There's another element in the ideals of covenants that we must never forget, and that's the element of human responsibility. Just like every suzerain-vassal treaty in the ancient world required loyalty from the subjects of the emperor, so it is that every single covenant in the Old Testament also required loyalty from the people of God. Now we always have to remember that the response of loyalty was always a response, a response to divine kindness — people did not earn their status before God. God established covenants with his people on the basis of his grace. But without exception, the ideals of the covenants always entail human responsibility — the requirement to live loyally before God.

At this point, we need to think about how each of these ideal elements enter into every Old Testament covenant. As we saw in the preceding lessons, Old Testament prophets understood that God entered into five covenant relationships. He established covenants with all the nations of the earth through Adam and Noah. And then he called Israel into a special relationship through covenants with Abraham, Moses and David, as well as a future new covenant in the latter days after the exile.

Think for a moment about the covenant with Adam. In the days of Adam, God's benevolence was displayed in the way he created the world for humanity. He took an uninhabitable, chaotic creation and shaped it into a wonderful garden in which humanity was to dwell. As we read in Genesis 1:2:

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the spirit of God was hovering over the waters (Genesis 1:2).

Then God made a paradise for his image and placed Adam and Eve within that paradise. This mercy was the basis upon which God entered into covenant with our first parents, Adam and Eve. At the same time, human responsibility was also required in the covenant ideal with Adam. God put Adam in the wonderful Garden of Eden, but he immediately set forth serious stipulations. In Genesis 2:16-17, we read these words:

You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die (Genesis 2:16-17).

Even in paradise, the covenant ideal included not just the benevolence of God, but also the responsibility of the human race.

Well, the same is true with the covenant with Noah. On the one hand, God mercifully rescued Noah and his family from the worldwide flood. As Genesis 6:7-8 puts it:

So the Lord said, “I will wipe out mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth.” ... But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord (Genesis 6:7-8).

The covenant with Noah was based on unmerited, divine mercy. Even so, the covenant that God made with Noah joins divine benevolence and kindness with human responsibility. When Noah came out of the ark after the flood, God set forth a number of explicit stipulations. In Genesis 9:7, God also reminded Noah of his basic human responsibility:

Be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it (Genesis 9:7).

Both divine mercy and human responsibility appear in the covenant with Noah.

Now let's turn for a moment to the special covenants that God made with the nation of Israel. You'll recall that the first covenant with Israel was through the patriarch, Abraham. God's grace appears in this covenant because God chose this one family to be blessed above all the families on the earth. God showed great mercy toward Abraham when he said these words to him in Genesis 12:2-3:

I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all people on the earth will be blessed through you (Genesis 12:2-3).

Once again, divine grace is the central element in the covenant ideal. Nevertheless, human responsibility was also an essential part of the ideal of Abraham's covenant. The patriarch's responsibility comes to the foreground on many occasions. For instance, in Genesis 17:1-2, God says these words:

I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers (Genesis 17:1-2).

The Abrahamic covenant included human responsibility.

When it comes to God's covenant with Moses, many Christians today have a false impression. They believe that this covenant was centered around works, but it wasn't. And we can see this plainly in the fact that the Ten Commandments begin with a historical prologue much like the prologues of Ancient Near Eastern suzerain treaties. Before any commandments were given, in Exodus 20:2 we read these words:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery (Exodus 20:2, ESV).

God expected his people to obey him, but on the basis of his act of mercy in bringing them out of the land of Egypt. Of course, the other side of human responsibility also appears in the covenant with Moses. Exodus 19:5 says these words to Israel:

Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession (Exodus 19:5).

Divine grace was coupled with human responsibility in the ideal stage of the covenant with Moses.

Now, the royal covenant with David also focused on divine benevolence. God spoke to David in this way in 2 Samuel 7:8:

I took you from the pasture and from following the flock to be ruler over my people Israel (2 Samuel 7:8).

God chose David's family as the permanent dynasty over his people out of love, not because of some merit that he saw in David. David's dynasty was established because God was merciful to him. At the same time, God joined this display of grace to David with the requirement of human loyalty. Listen to the way the requirements of loyalty are set forth in Psalm 89:30-32:

If [David's] sons forsake my law and do not follow my statutes, if they violate my decrees and fail to keep my commands, I will punish their sin with the rod, their iniquity with flogging (Psalm 89:30-32).

God expected the sons of David to be faithful to him in recognition of the grace he had shown to them.

The two sides of the covenant ideal also appear in the new covenant, which the prophets predicted would come through the Messiah. The apostle Paul put it succinctly in Ephesians 2:8-10:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is a gift of God — not of works, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Grace is the basis of the covenant in Christ. But now listen to the words that follow in verse 10:

For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:10).

The new covenant ideal also included the human responsibility of good works.

At this point, we should turn our attention to our second topic: how the prophets relied on these covenant structures.

PROPHETIC MINISTRY

On the one hand, the prophets constantly reminded the people of God of the mercies that Yahweh had shown them. At the same time, however, Old Testament prophets concentrated a lot of their attention on human responsibility in the covenant. They were called by God to approach the people and to remind them of the requirement of loyal service. We must always remember that the prophets knew there were both believers and unbelievers within the visible community of Israel. And for this reason, they treated human responsibility in the covenant as a testing or proving ground. The response of people toward the stipulations of the covenant showed the true nature of their hearts.

On the one hand, unbelievers within the visible community showed that they did not actually have saving faith because they would turn away from their covenant responsibilities. They failed to trust Yahweh for salvation, and they refused to give him their loyalty. These flagrant covenant violators would suffer the judgment of God. On the other hand, the test of human responsibility also identified those who were truly within the invisible covenant community. Now, these were people who were eternally redeemed. They had exercised saving faith in Yahweh, and they were on their way to eternal life. But the fact is that many times the prophets even challenged these people to prove their faith, much like the New Testament does. Listen to the words of Revelation 2:7:

**He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.
To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life,
which is in the paradise of God (Revelation 2:7).**

This kind of theme, that we must obey the Lord in order to prove that we genuinely do have saving faith, is a theme that runs throughout the prophets as well.

Now we have to be careful here not to think that the prophets were legalists simply because they emphasized human responsibility. The reality is that the prophets understood that God's grace was behind every act of obedience and faithfulness. We know this too from the whole teaching of scripture, that whenever people are faithful to the Lord, it's because the Spirit of the Lord is working within them. At the same time, however, the Bible constantly reminds us of our responsibility to obey. And because the prophets knew that God's grace was behind every act of obedience, they did not hesitate to call God's people into obedience and faithfulness.

So far in our examination of the dynamics of the covenants, we have seen the two sides of the covenant ideal. At this point, we should turn our attention to our second topic, covenant judgment. What were the dynamics of covenant life when the people of God turned away from service to the Lord?

COVENANT JUDGMENT

There are many forms of human government throughout the world. But there's one thing in common with every single human government: they all recognize that the people of the land will not obey all of their laws, and as a result, they establish a system of crime and punishment. The same kind of thing was true in God's covenant with Israel. He knew that his people were sinners. He knew that they would rebel against him and so he also set up a system of judgment over his people. The prophets played a very important role in this system of judgment. They were messengers of the covenant. They brought to mind the crimes, and they also warned of the punishments that God would give to his people if they violated his covenant. Now, to understand how the prophets functioned as messengers of judgment, we need to understand two elements of covenant judgment that God held over his people. First, we'll explore the types of judgments that prophets announced, and second, we'll explore the process which these judgments would follow. Let's take a look first at the types of judgments that Old Testament prophets threatened against those who flagrantly violated their covenant with Yahweh.

TYPES OF JUDGMENT

It's very important to realize that Old Testament prophets did not invent the types of judgments that they threatened. On the contrary, they looked to the Scriptures of the Old Testaments for lists or catalogs of the kinds of judgments that the people of God should expect. The vocabulary of the prophets reveals that they often depended on passages that come from the books of Moses. There are five main passages that guided the prophets as they listed off the kinds of judgments that would come against the people of God: Deuteronomy 4:25-28, Deuteronomy 28:15-68, Deuteronomy 29:16-29, and Deuteronomy 32:15-43, and finally Leviticus 26:14-39 provided information to the prophets as they sought to understand the types of judgments that God would bring against his people. There is so much material in these passages that it is difficult to summarize what they say. But it is safe to say that Moses wrote these passages to convey to the nation that there were two basic categories of covenant judgment.

Judgment in Nature

The first type of covenant judgment is that God would respond to persistent sin with judgment in nature. God threatens to remove his blessing from the natural order so

that the world would become hostile to the people of God. You'll recall that God brought Israel to a land flowing with milk and honey. The natural order in the Promised Land was going to be a tremendous blessing to the people of God. But the prophets warned that when Israel rebels, he will remove this blessing in judgment. Now, what kinds of natural judgments would come against the visible covenant community? Deuteronomy 4, 28, 29, and 32 as well as Leviticus 26 list at least six major types of natural judgments against the people of God. First, these chapters in the books of Moses tell us that God will sometimes send drought to the land of Israel. This drought would dry up the land so that the people will suffer tremendously, and there will be a pestilence. Famine will also come so that the people will have no food when they rebel flagrantly against the Lord. And disease will come upon them — they will receive fevers and boils and tumors and plagues. Wild animals will threaten human life and there will be a loss of population. Infertility and untimely death will decimate the animal and human population in the Land of Promise.

The prophets mentioned these kinds of covenant judgments time and again. They often warned that God was going to bring some natural disaster to disrupt life in the Promised Land. For example, listen to what God said in Haggai 1:9-11:

My house ... remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house. Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the oil and whatever the ground produces, on men and cattle, and on the labor of your hands (Haggai 1:9-11).

God often had his prophets announce that judgment was coming in the natural order.

Judgment in Warfare

Now in addition to judgment in nature, we also find that the prophets announced judgment in warfare. War often brings natural horrors, such as famine and disease, but God also spoke of sending human enemies against his people as a kind of covenant judgment. A number of warfare motifs appear in the writings of Moses. In Deuteronomy 4, 28, 29, 32 and Leviticus 26, we find at least five major categories of judgment in warfare. First, the people of God will suffer defeat. They will not be able to withstand the attacks of their enemies. Second, sieges will be laid against their cities. Cities will be surrounded by enemies and their inhabitants will suffer. Then there will be occupation of the land by enemies. The enemies of God's people will come into the Land of Promise and take control. Death and destruction is another covenant curse in warfare, because many of God's people will die at the hands of their enemies. And finally, the worse curse of all — God says that his people will be taken captive and scattered among the nations in exile.

Time and again the prophets not only announced that the people of God would be defeated by their enemies, but they also warned that exile from the Promised Land was

coming. For example, the prophet Micah warned that many Judaites would be exiled from the Land of Promise. In Micah 1:16 we can read these words of exile:

Shave your heads in mourning for your children in whom you delight; make yourselves as bald as the vulture, for they will go from you in exile (Micah 1:16).

Threats of judgment and warfare like these appear throughout the Old Testament prophets.

So we see that Old Testament prophets announced two basic types of covenant judgment: natural disasters and warfare. Now let's take a look at the process that God said he would follow as he imposed these kinds of judgments on his people.

PROCESS OF JUDGMENT

What processes of judgment did the prophets expect to take place? The prophets learned the process of judgment primarily from Leviticus 26:14-39. In this passage, Moses describes judgment as something that takes place over a long period of time and follows a particular pattern. As we examine this passage, we'll find at least three principles that govern the manner in which these judgments will come. God will show patience, but the judgments would increase in severity, and there will be a particular climax to these judgments. Let's think first about divine patience.

Divine Patience

Leviticus 26:14-39 makes it clear that God exercises great patience toward his people when they sin. God realizes that his people will rebel and that they will be stubborn, refusing to repent. So in this passage, Moses reveals that God will be very patient with his people. Leviticus 26 divides into five main sections: verses 14-17, 18-20, 21-22, 23-26, and 27-39. Each of these segments begins with God saying this: "If you will not listen to me..." and then he goes on to say what he will do to Israel in judgment. This repetition of "If you will not listen to me" shows that God intended to be patient with his people by giving them many opportunities for repentance.

One of the most succinct descriptions of the patience of God appears within Old Testament prophecy. The prophet Joel spoke of God's patience in Joel 2 when he called the people to repent. In 2:13, he said these words to Israel:

Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity (Joel 2:13).

The prophets believed very strongly in covenant judgment, but they also believed that Yahweh was very patient with his people.

The first principle of covenant judgment in Leviticus 26 is that God will be patient. But there is a second principle as well — God’s covenant judgments will come with increasing severity.

Increasing Severity

Just as the five segments of Leviticus 26 tell us that God is patient, they also tell us that God will increase the severity of his judgments. In verses 18, 21, 24 and 28, God warns his people in this way: if they continue to rebel against him, then he will increase the judgments seven times over.

This dimension of Leviticus 26 tells us that covenant judgment comes in degrees. Sometimes the prophets warned of relatively small judgments, and then they later warned of greater judgments to come. For example, we read of one smaller judgment in the book of Isaiah 38:1:

Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover (Isaiah 38:1).

Now, I’m sure that Hezekiah himself thought this was a great covenant judgment against him, but in terms of the whole nation, it was rather small—it was just one individual suffering the judgment of God. But on the other hand, after Hezekiah refused to submit himself to Yahweh, even after a miraculous deliverance from the attacking Assyrians, Isaiah gave a much more severe judgment. He announced that one day the Babylonians would conquer the entire nation of Judah. In Isaiah 39:6, we read these words:

The time will surely come when everything in your palace ... will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left (Isaiah 39:6).

This statement was much more severe than the threat against Hezekiah about his personal health. It was a threat against the entire nation. And many prophets would follow this very same pattern. They would speak of increasing judgments.

Not only do we find that God brought covenant judgments with patience and increasing severity, but we also find a third principle: the climax of judgment is exile from the land.

Particular Climax

The last section of Leviticus 26:27-39 warns that the worst judgment to come against the people of God would be an utter devastation of the land and exile from the Land of Promise. Listen to the way Moses puts it in Leviticus 26:33:

I will scatter you among the nations and will draw out my sword and pursue you. Your land will be laid waste, and your cities will lie in ruins (Leviticus 26:33).

In the minds of Old Testament believers, it was hard to imagine anything worse than this. God had brought Israel to a Land of Promise, a land flowing with milk and honey, and now the prophets were announcing that there was going to be an exile from this land. By the time we come to most biblical prophets, God had already warned time and again that he was going to send his people out of the land. And so we find the prophets announcing that exile was coming. For example, in Amos 5:26-27, we read these words:

You have lifted up the shrine of your king, the pedestal of your idols, the star of your god — which you have made for yourselves. Therefore I will send you into exile (Amos 5:26-27).

Although Moses made the threat of exile very clear in Leviticus 26 and a number of other passages, the people of Israel still found it hard to believe. It was popular to believe that God would never utterly drive out his people—at least Jerusalem would remain intact. The people had forgotten that their covenant with Yahweh entailed human responsibility, and this is why even in the last years of Jerusalem's safety, Jeremiah had to proclaim that the destruction of the city and the temple was coming. In Jeremiah 7:13-15 we read these words:

While you were doing all these things, declares the Lord, I spoke to you again and again, but you did not listen; I called you, but you did not answer. Therefore, what I did to Shiloh I will now do to the house that bears my Name, the temple you trust in, the place I gave to you and your fathers. I will thrust you from my presence, just as I did all your brothers, the people of Ephraim (Jeremiah 7:13-15).

God is gracious and patient and kind to his people; it takes a long time to make him angry, but he can be provoked to anger. And so we discover that God does have judgment over his people, but it is a patient and a kind judgment that he exercises over his people.

So far in this lesson on the dynamics of the covenants, we have seen the covenant ideal and covenant judgment. Now let's look at the third element in our discussion: covenant blessings. How does God pour out his blessings on his people?

COVENANT BLESSINGS

Have you ever been in a friendship where the other person just won't let go? Maybe you've moved far away and the letters keep coming even after you forget to respond, or the phone call comes and it's your faithful friend again. Well, it's good to

have friends like that, that stick with you throughout all of history. And the same was true for Yahweh and his relationship with Israel. The prophets knew that God would judge his people severely, but they also knew and proclaimed that Yahweh would never let go of his covenant people.

To explore this side of covenant life, we need to look at two considerations, just as we did in the examination of judgment. First, we'll look at the types of covenant blessing and then we'll look at the process of covenant blessing.

TYPES OF BLESSINGS

Blessings come to the people of God when they seek to be faithful to him. Of course, God does not expect his people to be perfect, but he does expect them to seek him sincerely, and not to rebel against him. When the people of the covenant are faithful in this way, God richly blessed them.

Blessing in Nature

The first category of blessing is blessing in nature. Just as Moses spoke of judgment in nature, he also spoke of blessing that would come in the natural realm. Moses revealed to Israel that God offered tremendous natural blessings if they would only serve him faithfully. This kind of motif appears in at least four ways in Deuteronomy 4, 28, 30, and Leviticus 26. First, Moses spoke of agricultural plenty. The fields would be full of crops if the people would be faithful to their Lord. Also, he speaks of livestock having fertility. The livestock would grow in great numbers if the people would serve the Lord faithfully. Health and prosperity would come to the people of God. They would enjoy general health and well-being, and in addition to this, the population would increase. The numbers of Israelites would increase so that they would fill the Land of Promise.

Announcements of blessings in nature shouldn't surprise us. When God first made humanity, he set us within a paradise — the Garden of Eden. But then God drove us out because of sin. When God's covenant people are faithful to him he promises to give them blessings, blessings in nature, so that they can experience the kinds of things God meant for the human race to have in the very beginning. Old Testament prophets spoke about the blessings of natural bounty in many ways. Listen to one example. In Joel 2:22-23 we read:

Do not be afraid, O wild animals, for the open pastures are becoming green. The trees are bearing their fruit; the fig tree and the vine yield their riches. Be glad, O people of Zion, rejoice in the Lord your God, for he has given you the autumn rains in righteousness (Joel 2:22-23).

In much the same way, Zechariah predicted that the people in his day would see the blessings of God when they obeyed the Lord. Zechariah 8:12 says these words:

The seed will grow well, the vine will yield its fruit, the ground will produce its crops, and the heavens will drop their dew (Zechariah 8:12).

Blessing in Warfare

Although the first type of covenant blessings focuses on natural bounty, a second major category appears time and again in the prophets, and this is blessing in warfare. Just as the people of the covenant suffered defeat in war when they were under God's judgment, they experienced victory and peace when they were under the blessings of covenant. This motif appears in at least four ways in Deuteronomy 4, 28, 30, and Leviticus 26. First, Moses tells the people of God that they would defeat their enemies. But beyond this, there would be an end to warfare; hostility with the nations would cease and there would be relief from all destruction. And, of course, there would be a return of any captives who had been taken away from the Land of Promise.

Old Testament prophets often spoke of these kinds of blessings in warfare. Listen to how Amos predicted a grand future of military success for the nation of Israel. In Amos 9:11-12, he said these words about the post-exilic period:

In that day I will restore David's fallen tent. I will repair its broken places ... and build it as it used to be, so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name (Amos 9:11-12).

In a world of hostilities and troubles, the prophet Amos announced that the house of David would have victory over all hostile enemies. And in much the same way, Micah in 4:3 announced that there would be great peace as a result of these victories:

They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore (Micah 4:3).

So we can see from these passages that the prophets oriented themselves toward the grace and the blessings of God. Although the prophets had much negative to say about judgment and about sin, the prophets also said that repentance and fidelity would lead to great blessings in nature and in war.

Now that we've seen the types of blessings which God would bring to his people, we should also look into the processes by which these blessings would come.

PROCESS OF BLESSINGS

Just as there was a process of judgment, so there is also a process of blessing as well. There are at least three principles that govern the process of divine blessing: first,

blessings come through grace; and then blessings come in various degrees; and that there is a climax of the blessings of God.

Grace

All too often, modern Christians have the false impression that in the Old Testament people earned their salvation or earned their righteousness before God. But nothing could be further from the truth. The prophets did not offer men and women the way of salvation through works. They called on people to repent and to seek the mercy of God. In Hosea 14:1-2, we read these words:

Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God. Your sins have been your downfall! ... Say to him, “Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips” (Hosea 14:1-2).

Notice that Hosea did not say that his readers should work hard and earn the blessings of God. On the contrary, the faithful in Israel knew that only mercy from God would bring about blessings. They sought forgiveness as a basis of covenant blessing — not human merit.

Degrees

The second principle that governs covenant blessings is that they come in varying degrees. Just as judgments came in degrees, so we may speak of lesser and greater blessings. On the lower end of the scale, Old Testament prophets spoke of relatively small mercies from God. For example, just as Isaiah told Hezekiah he was going to become ill and die, he also announced a small blessing to the king when he told him that God would let him live. In Isaiah 38:5, God said:

Go tell Hezekiah, “This is what the Lord, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayers and seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life” (Isaiah 38:5).

A good number of prophecies focus on these personal or individual kinds of blessings. But many times, the prophets also turned their attention to the great national blessings that God would bring to his people. For example, in 701 the Assyrians attacked Judah and had come right to the gates of Jerusalem. In Isaiah 37:34-35, the prophet announced clearly that God would deliver the people from this great defeat:

“By the way that he came he will return; he will not enter this city,” declares the Lord. “I will defend this city and save it, for my sake and for the sake of David my servant!” (Isaiah 37:34-35).

This was a great blessing to the people of God because their very existence was being threatened and God said he would give them the blessing of victory in war. As we read Old Testament prophets, we must always be alert to the smaller and to the greater blessings which God announced to his covenant people.

Climax

In addition to divine grace and degrees of blessing, a third principle governs covenant blessings — the climax of the remnant's restoration. Old Testament prophets believed that no matter how great a judgment might come, there would always be a remnant. Now, this remnant could be very large or it could be very small, depending on how the people reacted. But the prophets always said God would keep a remnant safe and would build on that remnant. For instance, Jeremiah said that Jerusalem would be utterly destroyed, but in Jeremiah 5:18, he assures the people that a remnant would survive:

“Even in those days,” declares the Lord, “I will not destroy you completely” (Jeremiah 5:18).

The survival of a remnant is important, because it was through a remnant that God promised to bring the greatest blessing of all to his people.

We have already seen from Leviticus 26 that the worst covenant curse was exile from the land. But in Leviticus 26:40-45, as well as Deuteronomy 4 and Deuteronomy 30, God promised that he would preserve a remnant, bring that remnant back to the land, and bless them even more than ever before. Listen to the way Moses put this matter in Deuteronomy 30:4-5:

Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather you and bring you back. He will bring you to the land that belonged to your fathers, and you will take possession of it. He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers (Deuteronomy 30:4-5).

This theme of remnant restoration appears throughout the prophets. For example, Jeremiah taught that after the exile God would give great natural blessings to his remnant. In Jeremiah 23:3, Jeremiah reported these words from God:

I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and I will bring them to their pastures where they will be fruitful and increase in number (Jeremiah 23:3).

In much the same way, after exile, the remnant would also receive a great blessing in warfare. The prophet Joel taught that when the people of God came back, this remnant would experience a great victory and enduring peace. In Joel 3:9, we read these words:

Proclaim this among the nations: Prepare for war! Rouse the warriors! Let all the fighting men draw near and attack (Joel 3:9).

But then in 3:17, we read of Israel's victory:

Then you will know that I, the Lord your God, dwell in Zion, my holy hill. Jerusalem will be holy; never again will foreigners invade her (Joel 3:17).

Joel spoke of a great victory in battle that would establish Israel as safe forever.

All Old Testament prophets looked forward to the restoration of the remnant of God's people. God promised that despite the greatest punishment of exile, the remnant would receive the greatest blessing of restoration.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we've explored how the prophets understood the dynamics of covenants and we've seen three main topics: First, the ideals of divine benevolence and human responsibility. And then we've also seen how the prophets warned of judgment from an individual level all the way to the grand judgment of national exile. And then finally, we've also seen that God would redeem his people both in small ways and then through a remnant, bring a grand restoration after the exile. These themes, these dynamics guided the Old Testament prophets in all they said, and these themes must also guide us as we study the Old Testament prophets.

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He Gave Us Prophets

LESSON
FOUR

Dynamics of the
Covenants
Faculty Forum



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He Gave Us Prophets

Lesson Four: Dynamics of the Covenants

Faculty Forum

With

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Dr. Brandon D. Crowe
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Dr. Russell T. Fuller
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Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.
Dr. Brian D. Russell
Dr. Seth Tarrer
Dr. K. Erik Thoennes
Dr. Larry Trotter
Dr. Miles Van Pelt

Question 1:

What is a covenant?

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

A covenant is a common political arrangement in the world of the Bible, typically between a greater king and a lesser king, and so sometimes they're referred to as *suzerain* — the greater king — and *vassal* treaties. The divine-human covenants you see in the Bible mirror that because God uses that political convention in order to reveal himself in his relationship with his people. So, the biblical covenants between God and man are a greater king — that is, God — making an arrangement, a commitment, a relationship with a lesser — that is, the people of Israel. There are various definitions offered among Old Testament scholars of what a covenant is. One very popular definition is O. Palmer Robertson's "a bond in blood, sovereignly administered." You see the elements of that. You see a bond; that is, a relationship that is more than just casual; it is a committed relationship. And so, in a covenant, God commits himself to his people, but in return they are to be committed to him as well. It's a bond in blood because sometimes you see, in the Bible, covenants are sealed with a blood ceremony, but what Robertson means, more than that, is a "bond in blood" meaning it's a life and death bond. That is, the relationship is one that can provide life, but the breaking of that relationship can result in death. And it's "sovereignly administered" in that it's not like a contract where two equal parties come together and negotiate a relationship. It's not a relationship with two equals, but it's sovereignly administered in that God is the greater. He offers these covenant relationships, and God's people enter into that relationship with him as their sovereign. Another definition that you might hear is a "love-life bond," because we have to remember that *love* is what motivates God to make covenant with his people. It's not *merely* legal. And so, in various traditions you see emphasis on the legal side; in others, you see emphasis on the relational or the love side. But it's a both-and type of relationship, and that relationship has consequences for good or for ill. And so, covenants commonly have curses that go along with the prospect of breaking the

covenant, but they also offer blessing for the parties keeping the covenant. And so, in the divine-human covenants of Scripture we see blessedness is the result of walking in the ways of God, keeping his commands, and as a result that relationship is a living relationship where God imparts his divine life to his people.

Dr. Larry Trotter

In the Bible, in both Old Testament and New Testaments, we find the words for what we call a “covenant.” Now, the Bible never gives a definition of a covenant, and so we need to try to look at similar arrangements that are called covenant and try to discern what those are. In the twentieth century, a number of theologians came up with different definitions. The broadest definition, perhaps, was Louis Berkhof’s definition. He simply called it a “pact” or “agreement between two parties,” which is a very broad definition... In the last century other theologians tried to be more specific, John Murray, for example... He said, “Well, let’s take our cue from the first use of the word, and it was used in the covenant with Noah.” ... And so he defined covenant as a sovereign administration of God’s grace and promise... Another definition, which is broader than that is O. Palmer Robertson’s. He noticed that in the covenants that there was almost always a shedding of blood, and so he called it “a bond in blood, sovereignly administered.” And that works well with most of the covenants. That would include the covenant with Adam because there was the shedding of blood when Adam and Eve were covered by the animal skins... Another interesting definition of covenant is Meredith Kline’s. Meredith Kline did work on Hittite treaties, and he noticed a parallel in the structure of Hittite treaties — the ancient Hittites of the Old Testament period — the Hittite treaties and the structure of the Mosaic law. And he began to see these parallels, and he drew some interesting implications from that, and he called it a ... “commitment that’s divinely sanctioned and administers the kingdom of God.” And that sounds a bit more complicated, but it’s actually quite broad... So it’s not a simple question when you ask, what is a covenant? You might have to ask, according to whom? Or which covenant are we looking at? But, I would say that it would be preferable to choose a broader definition of covenant so that we can see these various pacts or agreements between God and himself, between God and humanity in the state of innocence, and between God and Christ the Redeemer and his people after sin had entered into the world.

Dr. Seth Tarrer

In the Old Testament, a covenant is understood to be an alliance, an agreement, a treaty between either humans and other humans — two parties on earth — or, more theologically rich, between God and humans, particularly in the case of the Old Testament, his elect people of Israel. Covenants have occurred throughout Scripture. Agreements have been made between God and humans. First we see it with an explicit covenant being made with Noah. Next, God makes a covenant with Abraham that’s reiterated several times in the middle text of Genesis. God then makes a covenant with Moses at Sinai in the giving of the Law. God also institutes a covenant that perpetuates this agreement God has set with his people Israel. He does it with the king, David. And then finally, Jeremiah promises that this new covenant will be understood in a new way or new mode at some point in the future, which we see

inaugurated in the person of Jesus Christ at the institution of the Lord's Supper. When we think about covenant, however, it's important to realize, covenant was not an end in itself. Covenant was a means to an end. The end was relationship with God. No other ancient Near Eastern religion thought of their god in these personal terms. They obeyed, enacted sacrifice, performed duties in order to receive the blessings of their god. However, in the Old Testament, God comes to his people, he elects them out of his sovereign goodness, and he performs the covenant duties in Genesis because Abraham can't. God knows this... Throughout Scripture we see God at pains to keep this relationship alive. Now, the covenant can be understood in some ways as a conduit, not an end in itself. The conduit enables God's people to experience God's *chesed*, his lovingkindness, his goodness. And in that they can enjoy God's *shalom*.

Rev. Sherif Gendy, translation

A covenant is an agreement or treaty between two parties — a stronger one and a weaker one, a suzerain and a vassal, a greater and a lesser. In this agreement, the suzerain, or the master, sets stipulations for the covenant and imposes certain requirements. He commits to provide protection and offers some sort of blessings or aids to the weaker party, the vassal. On the other hand, the vassal, the weaker or the servant party, is required to offer his loyalty to the suzerain in the context of the covenant. There are also promises of more and greater blessings for faithfulness. At the same time, there are consequences for rebellion and disobedience where there will be punishment from the suzerain or the master. So, the covenant is an agreement between two parties in the form of a treaty that includes certain conditions and has consequences and sanctions in relation to the vassal's commitment to these conditions.

Question 2:

How has the discovery of ancient Near Eastern treaties helped us understand biblical covenants?

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

The faith of Israel, just like the Christian faith, is unique. It doesn't fit with any other religion in the world. But that's not to say that there aren't parallels between the Christian faith or Israel's faith that we can find in other ways of life, other religions, other cultures, even cultures that haven't been deeply influenced by the faith of Israel or by the Christian faith. And that's the way it is when it comes to the parallels that scholars often point out between biblical covenants and documents that we have discovered in recent history from the ancient Near East. There are parallels. That's not to say that Israel's covenants are *simply* like those things in the ancient world. They're not. They're different from those things, but there are some similarities, and these similarities do help us, in some respects, understand the workings of God's covenants in the Bible, because you always have to remember that the people living in the days of the Bible knew about these other things. They were common knowledge. And because it was common knowledge to them, they didn't need the

help that we often need, living so long after those times and so ignorant of those general cultural norms that everyone in that day understood. Well, in recent history there have been discoveries of texts from all over the ancient Near East, from the Hittites, and from Egypt, and from the Babylonians, and from the Assyrians, and all around, where you can find parallels that exist between documents that were given by ancient Near Eastern emperors and great kings and the ways that they regulated their kingdoms through these documents. Now, oddly enough, when God regulates his kingdom in the Bible, he regulates them by means of covenants, and these covenants have parallels, or have similarities, to the kinds of documents that we've found that ancient Near Eastern kings used. Again, that's not to say that God's just another ancient Near Eastern king or that Israel is just making this up because everybody believed it in these days. Rather, it's to say that God actually revealed himself this way to Israel, but in a unique and different way, still with some parallels and some similarities.

Now, one of the great controversies these days has to do with, what are those parallels? And what kind of documents from the ancient world actually give us those parallels? And sometimes people will say, "Well, there are these documents called "royal land grants" — or "royal grants," because there's a variety of them — where great kings or great leaders would grant land or offices or privileges to people. And we have these documents because, often, they're on the sides of these *kudurri*, these boundary markers that mark them off, and the words were there, and we've discovered them, and we can read them. And they do sound in many respects, many times, a lot like the kinds of things you find in Bible covenants. Another set of these documents from the ancient Near East is what we often call now "suzerain-vassal treaties," and these were treaties that were made between great kings and lesser kings establishing what their relationship was going to be and how things were going to be run in this big empire that the great king was establishing through these little kingdoms that he had conquered. And there are lots of parallels between those documents and biblical covenants also.

Again, that's not to say that the biblical covenants can be reduced to these things or that they are simply products of that ancient Near Eastern world, but rather that God revealed himself in ways that people could understand. And the way they understood things in their day was represented, in some respects, by these kinds of ancient Near Eastern documents. And so, it's just very helpful to be able to look at those documents so long as we don't fall into the trap of thinking that because there are *some* parallels, everything is parallel, or because there are *some* similarities, everything is similar, because the Bible tells us that God is our great *divine* king. He is not a human king, he's a divine king, and that he is wise and that he's holy, that he's not like any other king you can possibly imagine, not even like the other gods, so-called "gods," that he is greater than them all, and that he has his ways that he does things. And so, his covenants stand out for Israel and the new covenant for the Christian church. They stand out as distinct from all these other ancient Near Eastern documents that we can find and that we can study. As much as they can help us, they

can only help us a bit, because the only resource that gives us reliable, absolutely reliable understanding of what biblical covenants are is the Bible itself.

Dr. Daniel L. Kim

We see in the Old Testament, especially in the book of Genesis, two different types of treaties exhibited in Scripture. First, we see what we call a “parity treaty” between two people of equal ability, equal authority, in which they make an agreement that is mutually beneficial to both. So take for example Abraham and Abimelech, or even later on with his son Isaac. Abimelech reinstitutes a covenant with him because the covenant ends with the death of one of the two party members. And so, in cases like that, you have a treaty that is intended to benefit both, perhaps and most likely through the purpose of peace between the two parties so that neither party gets hurt, and that way they can both coexist or at least reasonably coexist with each other without any future issues. The second kind of treaty that we see is actually between what some people in the ancient Near Eastern called the “suzerainty-vassal treaty,” and that’s usually between unequal powers, one who is stronger and greater, who most likely has already overtaken you and conquered you and would now like to be in a relationship in which the greater person, the suzerain, receives all the benefits from the vassal. So, most often, it requires allegiance from the vassal to continue to pledge their allegiance to the suzerain. But most importantly, it actually also requires taxation. So, the suzerain, for the most part, will come yearly to the vassal and exact from it all the necessary animals, oil, all the wheat and barley that the suzerain will require for the coming year. And so, as a result, the vassal will typically tax his own people to make up for this relationship. But there is a benefit for the vassal and that is the suzerain will in turn come to its rescue whenever there is any conquering army or invading army that is in their presence, and so they had that kind of mutual protective relationship there as well.

Rev. Sherif Gendy, translation

Ancient Near Eastern archaeological discoveries have helped us understand biblical covenants. The ancient Near Eastern treaties had a certain structure or form that was divided into five main parts. The first part is the introduction in which the suzerain, or the sovereign, identifies himself. He announces his name and he plainly expresses his desires in this covenant. He also literally identifies himself and clearly and explicitly declares that this treaty is his full intention, and he was not forced into it. The second part is a historical prologue in which the suzerain, or the greater leader, mentions a certain historical event where he showed his benevolence or good deed to the other party — the vassal — of the covenant. He starts by reminding the vassal, or the servant, of the benevolence he provided in history. The third part or item is that, based on the suzerain’s identity and the benevolent work that he showed over history, he now sets his stipulations or laws. The general or main condition is loyalty, exclusive allegiance — “I gave you benevolence” — and as a result, it’s expected that the vassal be fully faithful and loyal to the suzerain. Also, there are more specific and detailed written stipulations in addition to the main condition, which is loyalty and faithfulness. The fourth part, is the sanctions or consequences. If the vassal obeys the stipulations, and behaves according to them, there will be blessings and more

benevolences from the suzerain. But, if he disobeys or rebels, there will be sanctions. All of these were written in much more detail in the treaty. Finally, there's the administration of the treaty. After the treaty is made, and all these details are written down, they make two copies, one for the suzerain and the other for the vassal. Each of them puts the treaty in the sanctuary where he worships his god ... to be a reminder and to add a sacred attribute to this document or agreement. Such an important document was put in their holiest place to indicate the importance of the document and how serious this agreement was and what was included in it, and that there was no way to manipulate or disrespect it.

Question 3:

How do all biblical covenants display God's benevolence?

Dr. Greg Perry

Every one of the covenants of Scripture begins with God's gracious initiative, that a great king is giving protection, giving land, giving benefits to a less powerful partner and is establishing this relationship — not the junior partner but the great partner, the great king — God is establishing this relationship, first with creation, then we see it with Noah and the renewal of that. We see it also with Abraham. And so, God is the beginning, the one who initiates this relationship, and he gives gifts and benefits in that covenant relationship to carry out what he wants his reign to do his business in the world. So, it's really interesting because the land really corresponds to the initial commission to Adam to subdue the garden, to subdue the earth. The promise of children in the covenants refer back to "multiply and subdue the earth." And so, the covenants restore the original pattern of how man should show forth God's reign in the world and bear God's image.

Dr. David Correa, translation

All biblical covenants display God's benevolence in several ways. One simple way we can see this is that God, without having any obligation, decides to enter into a relationship with his people. So then, God, out of his own grace, out of his own mercy, chooses for himself a people without having to do so. Also, divine benevolence is displayed in how God gives many blessings for his people to enjoy. In the case of Adam and Eve, in the first covenant, divine benevolence was shown in how the Lord put at their disposal all that he had created. The Lord gave them permission to eat freely of all the trees except the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Also, when he made restitution in the covenant with Noah, God once more displayed his benevolence by not only preserving the human race, but also guaranteeing them a stable world so that human beings would have the opportunity to be faithful to the Lord. And so, by the way, we can see this throughout the whole Bible... God shows his benevolence in many ways arriving, of course, at the new covenant when the Lord, by grace, grants that the Lord Jesus Christ will carry, on himself, the punishment that belongs to his people. And, in turn, the Lord, by grace, grants his people forgiveness of sins and bestows on them the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Dr. Dan Lacich

When we look at God's relationship with the people of Israel, one of the things that comes out clearly is that he blesses them in supernatural ways over and over again. And I think there's a real purpose behind that that helps them to be able to maintain their relationship with God and their loyalty to the covenant... And with God, it's never about us earning that kind of thing; it's really about his grace. And so, the supernatural blessings that he pours out upon them, I think, is the best way in the long run for people to continually be reminded, this is a God who loves us, who cares for us, who will never leave or forsake us, and because of that love that we've received from God, we turn around and continue to love him and stay loyal to that relationship.

Question 4:

Are divine covenants unconditional, or do they include an element of human responsibility?

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

It's very unfortunate, but a lot of Christians, when they hear the word "covenant," in their minds they automatically go, "Well, I know what a covenant is. It's a promise." And we all know that if a person makes a promise, there are no conditions attached to it. They're going to do it no matter what, especially if they "swear" they're going to do it — that kind of a promise. And it's true that God makes promises in his covenants and that he will keep those promises and that they will not fail, but it's a mistake to think that covenants are simply promises. Now, some Christian groups will say that some of the covenants in the Bible are promises, pure and simple, and some of them are conditional, and the way things are worked out depends on what people do. But in reality, if you take a look at the Bible very carefully, you can see that there are always elements of every covenant in the Bible — whether it's Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, or even the new covenant — there are elements or dimensions of each of those covenants that will be fulfilled no matter what. I mean, for example, when God says to Abraham that, "Your family is going to be the family that's going to become the instrument of my grace to the entire world," that's going to happen. It's absolutely going to happen. Now, *how* it's going to happen, that's another story, but we know that ultimately it's fulfilled in Jesus and the church, beginning with its Jewish roots, that this is the instrument, this is the fulfillment of that call of Israel to be, and that promise that God made that Israel would be that kind of instrument for the entire world. So, there are always dimensions of every covenant that God is ensuring will work out in one way or another. They are promises. But every single covenant also has conditions ... conditions that affect the way these promises work out in the lives of individuals and groups of people, because God is not going to fulfill his promises in particular ways with people who rebel against him, but rather he's going to, as it were, go around them, get them out of the picture. He's going to find a faithful people. He's going to fulfill his promises that way. And the reality is that the Bible story is just that. It's a story of how God does make promises

in his covenants, but that those promises have associated with them conditions of loyalty to God, and that there are consequences to all of these covenants. Now, in the Bible, the Bible sometimes will emphasize one side of this or the other. Sometimes a particular passage will emphasize the great promises that God makes in his covenants, and other passages will emphasize the conditions that are associated with those promises. But no matter what a particular passage emphasizes, it's always important for us to remember that God's covenants, yes, they are sure, and that God will fulfill what he has promised in one way or another, but at the same time there are conditions that dictate, by God's own free choice, how he's going to do that as people react to the requirement of loyalty that's upon because they are the covenant people of God.

Dr. Jeffrey J. Niehaus

The question of conditionality in divine covenants, or the question of unconditionality in divine covenants, has been under a lot of discussion for some time. I think the most natural and best view is this: all of the covenants, every one of them is unconditional in this sense, each of those divine human covenants will continue. God will continue each one until it has accomplished the purpose for which he instituted it. On the other hand, every covenant is also conditional... They're conditional in the sense that under each covenant the Lord gives conditions. Under the Adamic covenant, there is the condition of not eating the fruit of the tree... Under the Noahic covenant, there is the condition that has to do with murder, and there seem to have been other issues as well because in Isaiah 24:5 — which is an eschatological poem sometimes called the “Isaiah Apocalypse” — and the Lord through Isaiah speaks of how the people have broken the laws and the statutes of “the everlasting covenant.” Well, that term, *berith olam*, “everlasting covenant,” is first used in Genesis 9:16 of the Noahic covenant. And so, scholars generally recognize that those two passages are related. What that tells us is that there were other conditions under the Noahic covenant that didn't get recorded, but we know they existed. Under the Abrahamic covenant, also, there were conditions. There is circumcision, but there is also, when God reaffirms the covenant with Isaac, he says he's doing so because Abraham obeyed my laws, my decrees, my requirements. Well, what were those? We don't know what they were. We aren't told. But by the time we reach that point in Genesis, we find that there were other conditions. Of course, the Mosaic covenant has many things that people have to obey; those are conditions. And even under the new covenant, even though our salvation doesn't depend on our perfect obedience, we still are called to the obedience of faith. There are things that we are supposed to do too. So, I think that's the better way to understand those terms and understand how they relate to the covenants.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

The question might be asked, are all divine-human covenants conditional and, therefore, do they all have an element of human responsibility? I think I would answer that question, yes, they're all conditional. But that doesn't mean they're a relationship of equals or that they're even a relationship based on merit, in no way. Probably one of the best places to think about this is in the renewal of the covenant with Isaac. God said to Isaac that because your father Abraham walked in my ways,

observed my statutes, my law and my commandments, therefore, I blessed him so that I might fulfill the promises to him. You see, Abraham's obedience to God's requirements, the stipulations of the covenant, were the means, the God-ordained means by which he would bless the nations. And now, if you look at Abraham's relationship with God, it was one that was sovereignly initiated. It was sealed where God ... took the curses of the covenant toward himself in the splitting of the animals in Genesis 15, but none of that removed the conditions upon Abraham. And so, obedience to God's commands — which we could easily call that faithfulness to God's commands, faithfulness to trust the Lord — is the mechanism by which he administers the blessings of the covenant. But that is not to say that obedience merits God's response. It's only because God has agreed, covenanted to bless, that he graciously blesses for the obedience rendered.

Question 5:

In what ways did biblical covenants require loyalty?

Dr. Greg Perry

Each one of the biblical covenants that is rooted in the treaties of the ancient Near East reflect that this is a relationship, that a great king has brought another kingdom into relationship with himself. And so, every covenant has this expectation of loyalty on the part of the covenant partners. Sometimes biblical scholars have suggested that some covenants are promissory and others are obligatory, that the land that's given to Abraham is a promissory covenant, and the law that's given at Sinai is an obligatory covenant. But actually, what we see in the Bible and in the ancient Near East is that every covenant has both sides to it. Promises are being made but also it comes with an expectation of caring for and maintaining the relationship. So, we see that, even in the land grant treaty where God gives Abraham land, right after that, in chapter 17 and chapter 18 there's this expectation that, "You will walk before me, and you will teach your children my ways. You will walk in righteousness and in justice." So, God gives great gifts in his covenant, but also there is this expectation of love, of loyalty, of devotion to the great king.

Dr. David Correa, translation

The divine covenants, in many ways, required loyalty on the part of the vassals, in this case, the people of God. We can see that in the beginning, God, of course, told Adam that he could eat from every tree in the garden, but he put a restriction saying, "but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." ... And so, just as he required Adam's loyalty, we can see throughout the history of the biblical covenants that the Lord requires obedience, that he demands loyalty. Many mistakenly think that the covenant doesn't impose any obligation on the vassal. That's a mistake, a common error committed when interpreting biblical covenants. We can see in the law of Moses, in the prophetic books, and up to the new covenant, how God calls for obedience. The only reason we can be considered people who are loyal to the covenant is because Jesus

Christ kept the terms of the covenant for us. He was obedient, perfectly and completely, to the terms of the covenant. He was completely loyal. And, by grace, his obedience is given to us. But even though it's not by works but by grace that we have received the righteousness of Christ, it doesn't mean we have no responsibility at all. The New Testament, time and again, makes it perfectly clear that they who are in covenant with God, and who profess faith in Christ, should demonstrate their loyalty by their obedience.

Rev. Sherif Gendy, translation

Through the covenant, God shows his steadfast love to us and gives us blessings and good things, but he requires, or asks, man to respond to these blessings by obeying his commands. Such obedience is through a genuine love for God. So, when the commandment says to love God with all your heart, mind, and soul, it means that you must love God with all of your being, a perfect love with a perfect loyalty and dedication to the Lord in the context of the covenant. Actually, there is a close relationship between loving the Lord and obeying the Lord. That's why Jesus, in John 14:23, said these words:

If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him (John 14:23).

Here, Jesus connects love in a direct way with obeying his commands. But Jesus didn't stop there. Because of the great importance of this issue, he also mentioned it in a negative form. Just like mentioning it in a positive form, he mentioned it in a negative form. In verse 24, he said:

Whoever does not love me does not keep my words (John 14:24).

Therefore, love here is a voluntary act that stems from a conviction of faith from a person who is committed towards the Lord within the covenant. Man loves the Lord because he obeys the Lord, because the Lord has already shown steadfast love to him and taken the initiative in the covenant by giving him many blessings and good things. In Exodus 20, we read the Ten Commandments, and especially in the second commandment, God says these words:

You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments (Exodus 20:4-6).

Our Lord here connects keeping the commandments with love when he mentions “those who love me and keep my commandments,” I will show them “steadfast love.” Therefore, the commandment to love God with all our hearts, minds and souls is closely and directly related to the covenant God made with us.

Pastor Ornan Cruz, translation

When we’re given the commandment to love God with all our mind, soul and heart, it affects all areas of our lives. In other words, it could have been translated, “Love God with all your being.” The Lord who has made a covenant with us has given us a commitment to be faithful, and we, as the other part of the covenant, we have a duty to be faithful to the God who has covenanted with us. In other words, loving God with our minds, with our hearts and with our souls is the response of our faithfulness to God, the response of our loyalty to God. We are telling him, “Lord, we are putting all of our being before you.”

Question 6:

How do the Ten Commandments demonstrate that God’s relationship with his people is based on his grace and mercy?

Dr. David T. Lamb

It’s tempting, as we look at the Ten Commandments, to see, oh, *more laws*. You know, God in the Old Testament gives his people a lot of laws. But as we look deeper, as we look closer at a lot of these laws, particularly even the Ten Commandments, we encounter God’s grace. Look at how the Ten Commandments begin. It says, “I am Yahweh, your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” So, we see God, first of all, being a God of deliverance, showing grace and mercy to his people. But even as we look through these commands, we can see grace. Well, basically, I mean, as Jesus essentially encapsulates the Ten Commandments — love God; love your neighbor — we see that these are commands that help us connect, reconcile, be in relationship with God and with humans. I see grace in that.

Dr. Brian D. Russell

The Ten Commandments are a powerful witness to God’s grace. A lot of times when we think about the Old Testament and the laws, we think about them just being about obedience, about earning God’s favor, but when we look carefully at the Ten Commandments, we can actually see that, in a sense, they’re showing us God’s grace by God graciously showing us how to respond to his grace. And that’s really the key piece. The Ten Commandments start with this statement by God ... that before God gives any laws to his people, God reminds them of his grace: “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” And what that does is sets up the rest of the Ten Commandments, not as laws to *become* God’s people, but gives God’s people an ethos, or a way of life, that allows them to respond to

God's grace. In fact, in the synagogue, Jewish persons actually take that statement as the first commandment — "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt" — as a way of reminding themselves about grace. But then, as you move through the rest of the Ten Commandments, how do we respond to God's grace? How do we live as people that have been delivered? Well, the Ten Commandments basically have two sections that are connected by the Sabbath commandment. In the first commands we have essentially, how do you love God? And you love God by having no other gods before the Lord, by not making graven images or images of God, and by not taking the Lord's name in vain. So, we love God by ... not practicing idolatry, essentially. So, that's the one piece. We have this vertical relationship with God, and we see God wants us to respond to his grace by being fully in allegiance to him. Then the second half of the Ten Commandments, starting with "Honor your father and mother," is we have a series of laws that give us standards for interacting with other people, because with the God of the Scriptures, it's not just a personal spirituality; there's a communal piece to this. It's not enough to simply love God. That's the critical piece, but then that has to then be expressed in the way that we live and love other people, and that's the second part of the Ten Commandments. Then right in the middle, we see this other piece of God's grace. It reminds us to keep the Sabbath: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy," or "by keeping it holy." And right there we see in a microcosm the ethic that God wants. God has created us, ultimately, not for work but for rest, to abide in God's presence, and on Sabbath God combines, really, that vertical relationship of loving him with how we treat other people by carving into the fabric of creation this one day in which we do nothing; we remember God's grace... Everything closes down that day as we remember and practice the love for God and the love for our neighbors. And so, we see God's grace in action throughout those commands.

Dr. Brandon D. Crowe

Maybe some people think of the law of God as constrictive and antithetical to grace, but when we look at the way that God gave the law in the Old Testament, we can see that it was a gracious thing for God to give the law in the way that he did. What we see is that God gave the law to his people *after* he redeemed them from bondage of slavery in Egypt. As he led them out and powerfully intervened on their behalf, he then brings them into the wilderness and condescends to them and reveals his plan for how they are to live under the lordship and the kingship of God who is their great king. And so, the law is not something that God required his people to keep in order that he then might redeem them. Instead, the law was given after God redeemed them from Egypt and shows his people the way that they are to live under the lordship of God as great king, and how they are to live among one another as a redeemed people. And so, whenever you read about the law in the Old Testament, it's already being given in the context of God's gracious condescension to his people.

Question 7:**What is the relationship between faith and works in the Christian life?****Rev. Larry Cockrell**

The relationship between faith and works is that they are companions. I would consider them to be twins. There is a saying that goes, “Faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is not alone.” And so, the idea of partnership, of companionship exists in that. Primarily, when Paul deals with faith in Ephesians 2:8, he recognized that one can only come to salvation through faith in Christ. But then James goes on and he, I won’t say “takes it to another level,” but he provides for us the reality that if one is saved, then that salvation should be authenticated by works, meaning by the character, the lifestyle of that person, also by the kind of service that that person renders to his neighbor. If they are saved, then again, they will authenticate salvation by the kind of works that they do. He goes on to say, “Show me your faith without your works, and I’ll show you my faith by my works.” And so, again, they are twins. They do go together. If one is saved, then they will, by the grace of God, produce good works, authenticating that salvation has come to that heart.

Rev. Clete Hux

The relationship between faith and works is that they’re not opposed to one another as so many people think that they are. And it almost seems, however, that it’s paradoxical for the Scripture to teach that we’re saved by grace, free gift, rather than works, and then on the other hand, say that faith without works is dead. But the two really go together. As a matter fact, if we go back to Ephesians 2:8, 9, we need to look at verse 10. It says, “For we are ... created in Christ Jesus to [perform] good works.” So, we’re not saved by works. We’re saved by grace through faith that produces works and conforms us more and more to the image of Christ.

Question 8:**What is saving faith?****Dr. Jeff Lowman**

Certainly, one of the main themes in the Gospel of John is saving faith. To “believe” is an emphasis throughout the gospel. And its emphasis is placing in two areas. One is that belief, or becoming a child of God, is a work of God himself, and the other is that it is an action, as it were, taken on the part of the individual. And so, John in his gospel very clearly places a theological term, a synergistic aspect, upon faith. Now, faith is understood, saving faith is understood, certainly, as a gift. It’s God’s grace in our life that we believe. But it is based upon something that we are doing, and so there has to be an aspect of knowledge. There must be an understanding that Christ has died on the cross for our sins. There must also be a sense of assent, that we agree with that. But it goes far more than just knowing and agreeing. There is the sense of trust, and that is the crucial aspect of faith. It’s the empty hand of the individual reaching out and receiving all that God has done through his Son, Christ.

Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

You know, one of the most frustrating things about the world around us is that the word “faith” is used so casually and so carelessly. There are a lot of people who basically talk about faith as if they have faith *in faith*. That’s not the way Christians talk about faith. There are all kinds of different faith. I’m sitting in a chair right now. I’ve got pretty good confidence that it’s going to hold me up. I’ve got faith in this chair. However, I wouldn’t have any faith in this chair to do anything other than to hold me up. It serves no other purpose. When we talk about the faith that saves, it’s a faith *in Christ*. It is trusting and resting in that trust that Christ has done all that is needful for our salvation. The faith that saves is a faith that is faith in Christ, knowing that it’s Christ who paid the penalty for our sin, knowing that it is Christ who purchased our salvation, knowing that it is *Christ* who has made full atonement for our sins, knowing that in him we have full forgiveness of our sins. The faith that saves is simply the confidence to rest and trust in Christ, knowing that he has done this on our behalf, that there is no more that is left to be done, and that he keeps those who come to him by faith forever. You know, saving faith, the faith that saves, is a faith that is defined by the fact that in its solitary, most essential meaning, we trust Christ. We would have nothing else. We desire nothing else. We know that Christ is sufficient for our salvation.

Question 9:

What does Leviticus 26 teach us about God’s patience in bringing divine judgment?

Dr. Douglas Gropp

It’s interesting to make a comparison of the covenant curses in Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 26. Curses in Deuteronomy 28 are fairly straightforward, but in Leviticus 26 they’re staged, giving the opportunity at each stage for Israel to repent. The recitation of the curses are designed in Leviticus to provide an opportunity to repent, and at the end of those lists of curses, there’s a section, I think it’s verses 40-41, actually making provision for the Israelites to confess their sins with the hopes that the Lord will honor the covenant that he made with the fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and bring about a restoration... In the Prophets, and their use of covenant curses in judgment, sometimes they proclaim those curses using a transition word in Hebrew that’s translated “therefore” — *lahen* in Hebrew — where it’s giving God’s verdict on their sins and proclaiming the judgments that is to come. But sometimes the prophets use another term that’s often also translated “therefore,” but I think should be translated “that is why” — *alken* in Hebrew — and it’s really giving an explanation for why the covenant curses are already beginning to be realized. And in that sense, we see in the Prophets, the unfolding of the curses together with an implicit call for Israel to repent so as to bring an end to the full realization of the curses, mirroring the staging of the curses that we have in Leviticus 26.

Dr. David Correa, translation

Leviticus 26 teaches us, in many ways about God's patience, the great patience of our Lord. However, we can mention one that is very interesting. This was when Moses revealed the judgments that would come for unfaithfulness to the covenant. Moses tells us that the Lord didn't bring complete and total destruction all at once. Rather, he tells us there in Leviticus 26 that if the people were unfaithful, if they were disobedient, God would bring certain calamity to them. And if there was no repentance, he would gradually strengthen the punishment, continuing in this way until they came to the greatest threat, and that was exile. So, we see that God was patient because he gradually intensified the punishment, the curses, that would come upon the disobedient. That teaches us truthfully, as the psalmist tells us, that our Lord is a God slow to anger and abounding with mercy.

Question 10:

If some of God's blessings are contingent on our obedience, does this mean that our good works contribute to our salvation?

Dr. Daniel L. Kim

There's a unique relationship between good works and receiving God's blessings. Certainly, God promises blessings in return for good works. Does that necessarily mean that the good works will somehow help us gain our salvation? And the answer is clearly "no." Scripture has made it clear in both the Old and the New Testament that our relationship with God and our salvation is based on faith. Just like Abraham believed, so we are commanded as his sons and daughters to believe in God as well. So, the question is not, does it help us in our salvation? But the question is, does it help us in our relationship while we are here on earth and also in heaven? And I think that would be a more helpful question to ask regarding our good works. So, for example, let's say that somebody is a part of God's covenant community and God has a desire to use that person in a more leadership role. Well, certainly, it would have to come through demonstration of their faithfulness, not only before God, but also before God's covenant community, and how else can the Lord bless this person if the person does not respond with a proper obedience to God's commands and his laws. So, I would say that, in many ways, the question to be asked is, how can I better serve the Lord? In what way can I become more useful to him? And that's one of the ways we can do so, by being obedient and faithful to God's laws and his commandments in which we demonstrate that we are abiding in him in all that we do.

Dr. Dan Doriani

Good works are necessary for our salvation, but we have to distinguish the sense in which that's true. They're not what we call an *antecedent* necessity, that is to say, something we have to do in order to become saved, but they're a *consequent* necessity. That is to say, they're a necessary consequence of our salvation. Anyone who's truly a believer will produce, and must produce good works as a sign that Christ is alive; his Spirit is alive, in us. We could distinguish it this way: My children

do not obey me in order to become my children, in order to get a father. They obey me because I'm their father, because they love me and I love them. That's how we do good works for God our Father in heaven.

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

Our good works don't contribute to our salvation, but they do contribute to the quality of our relationship with God here. And so, we're his people by his sovereign grace, but certain blessings of God are ours through obedience, through faith. God says that "My lovingkindness is toward those who fear me," and so, fearing the Lord and obeying the Lord and worshiping the Lord, does bring blessings in this life. And so, my relationship with my daughters is established. They're mine, that's for sure, that's never going to change. But my fellowship with them, depending on their obedience or level of respect, does change over time because I love them and I care for them and I want them to know that how they live before me matters and it makes a difference, not in our relationship, that's for sure, but certainly in our fellowship.

Dr. Miles Van Pelt

When we consider the role of good works in the life of the believer, we really have to think on two different levels. There is, on the one hand, the big picture, the big, redemptive, historical picture where God is working on our behalf to do what we could not do for ourselves, where we rest and trust in Christ's work on our behalf. That's the first step in recognizing the role of works in the life of the believer. But in light of that, once we rest in the work of Christ on our behalf, there is, therefore, at the actual daily level of living, the fruit of that resting which is good works in the life of the believer. And the good works in the life of the believer does produce blessing and does produce good things, good marriages, good families, good education, good community involvement... So, on the one hand, at the big level, we rest in someone else's work, the work of Christ on our behalf, but that produces fruit in our lives, and that fruit produces good works, which is the result of a greater good work. So, you have to get that priority right. It's not the lower level that affects the upper level. It's the upper level that makes the lower level possible.

Question 11:

How did God promise to bless Israel and Judah after the judgment of exile?

Dr. Russell T. Fuller

There were many blessings that God offered Israel and Judah after their exile. When you go back even to 1 Kings 8 where Solomon is dedicating the temple, he talks about the time when God might exile them because of their disobedience, but he says wherever they are, no matter what situation they're in, they just need to look toward Jerusalem, they need to look toward the temple and pray to the Lord, and if they'll turn back to him, God will answer their prayer. He'll forgive them of their sins and he'll restore them to their land. Of course, one of the great covenantal promises of the

Old Testament was the giving of the land of Israel to the Israelites, but one of the great judgments of the Old Testament was to take them out of their land. But the promise for exile is, though, “I’ll bring you back.” And what the exile does to the children of Israel is, they were given over to idolatry, and what the exile was going to do is burn idolatry out of their soul. And so, to bring them back in the land, and also, there were other promises given. For instance, they built a temple, a second temple. And when the people first saw that they were very disappointed because some of them remembered the first temple and the glory of that. But Haggai the prophet says, wait a minute, this second temple is going to have greater glory than the first temple, and the reason for that is that Messiah himself would come to that temple, and therefore, that temple was going to have a much greater glory than the one before. And so, even though they were going to be restored ... from exile and so forth, they knew that their restoration was not the full promises of God, because Nehemiah, in chapter 9, talks about, we’re still slaves, meaning that they were slaves, really, to the people of Persia at that time. They did not have total freedom yet, but the ultimate promise of restoration from exile was the coming of Messiah and that he would take away our sins. That was the ultimate promise of blessing of return from exile that the children of Israel were looking for.

Dr. Sean McDonough

The Old Testament narrative as a whole is dominated by the theme of exile. It goes back to the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve, and that’s just recapitulated in Israel’s own history. And so, this sort of depressing turn of events, which looms so large in the Old Testament narrative, naturally calls forth a desire for some hope beyond exile. So, we have plenty of near-term prophecies, particularly in Isaiah, that God will restore his people, but when you tie that back into the creation narrative, you realize that mere restoration to land is never going to be enough to undo the primal damage done in the beginning, or shortly after the beginning... And so, it’s quite natural to find in the Old Testament prophets a yearning for near-term deliverance for Israel perhaps at the hand of a particularly gifted king, but also ultimate deliverance from some ultimate kingly representative of God’s people.

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He Gave Us Prophets

LESSON
FIVE

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF PROPHECY



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He Gave Us Prophets

Lesson Five

Historical Analysis of Prophecy

INTRODUCTION

I have a friend who told me a story recently. He was married just a few years ago and his wife was cleaning out one of his drawers when she found a letter that came from an old girlfriend. At first she was very upset because she thought the letter was written recently, but my friend was able to prove that the letter was written years ago by the envelope and the date on the envelope. Well, my friend looked at me and he said, “Rich, I don’t know what to tell you, because I don’t know what would have happened if I had not been able to prove when that letter was written.” Unfortunately, many times Christians misunderstand Old Testament prophecy because they are not concerned about when the prophets spoke or when the prophets wrote their books. And if we’re going to study Old Testament prophets responsibly, we must be ready to understand the dates and the times in which they ministered.

We have entitled this lesson “Historical Analysis of Prophecy,” and we’re going to examine how Old Testament history provides an essential context for properly understanding Old Testament prophecy. Our historical analysis will divide into four major periods of prophetic history: first, the early monarchy; second, the period of Assyrian judgment; third, the period of the Babylonian judgment; and then finally, we’re going to look at the restoration period. Let’s take a look first at the period of the early monarchy.

EARLY MONARCHY

We saw in an earlier lesson that prophecy rose to prominence in Israel when kingship rose to prominence. And so it will help us to begin our historical analysis of prophecy by looking at the early monarchy — the days when Israel first had kings. From the time of Abraham, who lived around 2000 B.C., until the days of Saul, Israel had no human king. But David’s kingdom was established around 1000 B.C., and his kingdom remained intact for several generations. As we explore this period of Israel’s history, we’re going to ask two important questions: what were the major events that took place in this period, and how did these events shape the prophetic ministries?

MAJOR EVENTS

Let’s first consider two major events that took place in the early monarchy. In the first place we can speak of the united kingdom.

United Kingdom

Around 1000 B.C. David took the throne in Jerusalem. He united all the tribes, established relatively secure borders for the kingdom, and he brought the ark of God to Jerusalem in preparation for his son to build a temple for God. Solomon, the son of David, followed in his father's footsteps. He expanded the territories of Israel and kept the tribes united. Also, Solomon built a glorious temple and dedicated it to the worship of Yahweh. The books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles make it clear that David and Solomon were not perfect kings. But still, the Bible looks at this period as a time that was ideal, when the people of God received many blessings.

Divided Kingdom

As good as conditions were in these early years, we have to remember another major event, the divided kingdom. Sadly, Solomon and his son Rehoboam did not treat the northern tribes with the respect that they deserved, so the tribes of the north broke away and formed their own nation around 930 B.C. We learn of this event in 1 Kings 12 and 2 Chronicles 11. When Rehoboam refused to treat the northern tribes justly, they broke away and formed their own nation. Jeroboam I became king of the northern tribes, and set up a capital in Samaria along with worship centers in Dan and Bethel. Now, Jeroboam went much too far in his rebellion against the south. He established idols in his worship centers at Dan and Bethel, and by doing this the northern kingdom became severely corrupt. The nation turned away from loyalty to Yahweh and refused to submit to their covenant responsibilities. Now, Judah had its ups and downs during this period as well, but for the most part they remained much more faithful than northern Israel.

So we've seen two major events in the early monarchy: first, the united kingdom under David and Solomon when the people were blessed tremendously, and then the division of the kingdom in the days of Rehoboam.

Now that we've seen two major events that took place during the early monarchy, we have to ask how these events shaped the ministries of the prophets.

PROPHETIC MINISTRIES

There are sixteen different prophets whose ministries are summarized in the major and minor prophetic books of the Old Testament. The books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles make it clear that the period of the early monarchy was full of prophetic activity, but none of these books of prophecy come from that period. We may only speak of the early monarchy as providing a background to the prophets that we're studying. Now we can see this background in at least two ways.

Covenant Ideals

On the one hand, later-writing prophets looked back to the days of the united monarchy as establishing important royal covenant ideals. They based all of their hopes for the people of God on the covenant God made with David and confirmed with Solomon. They longed for the day when Israel would be reunited with Judah as in the days of David and Solomon. They looked forward to the days when the throne of David would be secure again and the borders of the land would be extended once again. So in this sense, the united monarchy provides a background for the writing prophets of the Old Testament.

Divided Kingdom

On the other hand, the division of the kingdom also provided a background to the fact that the writing prophets served two different nations. These nations had relatively separate histories. Some prophets served Yahweh in the northern kingdom, threatening covenant judgment and assuring the people of a day of great healing and blessing. Their focus was on Samaria, the capital of the northern tribes. Other prophets served Yahweh in Judah and they warned of judgments and offered blessings to the people of God in the south, but they focused on Jerusalem and the tribe of Judah.

Although no writing prophets came from the early monarchical period, we discover that this period formed an essential background to the ministries of all prophets. The period of the early monarchy established the ideals of the covenant and it also established the reality of a northern and southern kingdom.

So far we've seen the background of the early monarchy. Now we have to move into the second major period of prophetic history, the period of the Assyrian judgment.

ASSYRIAN JUDGMENT

As we've seen in the earlier lesson, the people of the covenant had responsibilities to be faithful and loyal to the Lord, and when they flagrantly violated this covenant, they found themselves in a situation where God would send judgment in war. The first time God sent major war against the people of God was during the period of the Assyrian judgment. The divine judgment of defeat in war came upon the people of God through the Assyrian empire during the years especially of 734 to 701. During the 8th and 7th centuries B.C., the Assyrian empire grew in strength and conquered many nations. At the height of its power, the Assyrian empire stretched from modern day Turkey to the Persian Gulf and as far south as Egypt. Israel and Judah could not avoid dealing with this massive and aggressive empire. To explore the period of this Assyrian judgment, we'll look at two matters again: what were the major events that took place at this time, and how did these events influence the ministries of the prophets during these centuries?

MAJOR EVENTS

What major events took place in the centuries of the Assyrian dominance that have an influence on Old Testament prophetic writings? At least three major historical events took place that are important for our study: first, the Syrian-Israelite coalition; second, the fall of Samaria; and third, the Sennacherib invasion.

Syrian-Israelite Coalition

The Syrian-Israelite coalition involved conflict among three small nations under Assyrian control at that time: Syria, northern Israel and Judah. We can read about these events in several places in the Old Testament, but one very interesting passage is Isaiah 7. Around 734, Syria and northern Israel grew tired of paying tribute to the Assyrian empire, so they decided to build a coalition to resist the Assyrians because the Assyrians were experiencing trouble in other parts of their empire. In addition to building their own coalition, Israel and Syria tried to force Judah into joining their ranks. But Ahaz, the king of Judah, refused to join them and appealed for help from Assyria. These events had many results for the people of God, but we should be aware of at least one of those major consequences. Both the North and the South were on a path of conflict with Assyria. Northern Israel had rebelled against Assyria and so the kings of Assyria came, attacked and destroyed northern Israel. Judah aligned herself with Assyria for a while and so she owed great tribute and great taxes to the empire of Assyria. Eventually, however, even Judah rebelled against Assyria and judgment was going to come against southern Judah as well.

Fall of Samaria

The second major event of the Assyrian period of judgment was the fall of Samaria. Samaria was the capital of northern Israel and became the object of Assyrian vengeance because of the rebellion of the Syrian-Israelite coalition. We read about this event in 2 Kings 17. The great Assyrian army marched against northern Israel and destroyed Samaria, and the Assyrians sent many northern Israelites into exile. Now, this event marked a new day for the people of God, but the climax of covenant judgment in large-scale exile actually took place for the first time with the destruction of northern Israel at the hands of the Assyrians.

Sennacherib Invasion

The third major event of the Assyrian judgment occurred in the Sennacherib invasion of Judah. Judah escaped the wrath of Assyria for a while because they submitted themselves to Assyria to gain protection from the northern kingdom. But later on, even

Judah eventually rebelled against Assyria, and they incurred the wrath of this great empire. Several attacks came against Judah, but the worst came around 701 B.C., the Sennacherib invasion. We can read about this event in 2 Kings 18 and 19. The Assyrians destroyed many Judaite cities and came as far as Jerusalem. In fact, it appeared that all was lost until Hezekiah, the king of Judah, turned to Yahweh for help and was miraculously delivered. Now, Judah remained a vassal state of Assyria, but she avoided total destruction in the days of Hezekiah and the Sennacherib invasion.

So we can see that there were three major events during the Assyrian judgment: first, the Syrian-Israelite coalition in 734; second, the destruction of Samaria in 722 B.C.; and finally, the Sennacherib invasion of 701.

Now that we've seen several major events that took place during the Assyrian judgment, we have to examine how these three events influenced the ministries of the prophets.

PROPHETIC MINISTRIES

The Assyrian judgment had great influence on the ministries of prophets. Of the sixteen books that we have in the Old Testament, six of them report the ministries of Yahweh's emissaries during this period: Jonah, Hosea, Amos, Micah, Nahum and Isaiah. All of these prophets ministered during the time of the Assyrian judgment. Let's briefly summarize what these prophets had to say about the Assyrian judgment.

Jonah

First we should mention the prophet Jonah. According to 2 Kings 14:25, God called Jonah to prophesy during the reign of Jeroboam II who was king in northern Israel from around 793-753 B.C. And the place of Jonah's ministry was unique among the prophets because God called him to go to Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria. He went to this capital city of the Assyrians and preached the word of Yahweh, and his central message was simple, as we read in Jonah 3:4:

Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned (Jonah 3:4).

Much to Jonah's regret, the city of Nineveh repented when they heard this word from Yahweh, and God did not bring the disaster he threatened against the city. Jonah's ministry marks the mercy of God extended even to an empire as evil as the Assyrian empire.

Hosea

A second prophet who ministered during the Assyrian judgment was Hosea. Hosea 1:1 tells us that Hosea served in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. Uzziah's last year to reign was around 740 B.C., and Hezekiah's first

year to reign was around 716 B.C. This range establishes a long period for the ministry of the prophet Hosea. He ministered primarily in northern Israel from around 750 B.C., at least until the fall of Samaria in 722 B.C. At that time Hosea probably migrated to the South. And so we can see that Hosea prophesied in the days of prosperity before the Syrian-Israelite coalition, and he also prophesied through to the time of the fall of Samaria.

The focus of Hosea's prophecies reveals that he ministered in northern Israel. Most of his prophecies consist of warning against corruption and evil in the North. Hosea's central message was this: the northern kingdom was so corrupted by sin that God was going to judge them by bringing the Assyrians to destroy Israel and Samaria. This prediction, of course, was fulfilled with the fall of Samaria. Hosea did offer hope, however. He said that one day the covenant blessing of restoration would come, even after the exile.

Amos

The third prophet to focus on the Assyrian judgment was Amos. Amos 1:1 tells us that Amos ministered when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam was king of Israel. This verse gives us a range of dates for Amos' ministry from around 760 to 750 B.C. Amos served prior to the dates of the Syrian-Israelite coalition in 734. He served during the dates of northern Israel's prosperity and their complacency under Jeroboam II. And like Hosea, Amos ministered in northern Israel, and his main message was this — he warned the generation of his day that the Assyrian judgment was coming and that Samaria would fall and that exile was going to take place. As Amos says to the Israelites in Amos 5:27:

“Therefore I will send you into exile beyond Damascus,” says the Lord, whose name is God Almighty (Amos 5:27).

In the last chapter of his book, Amos reiterates the hope that the exile was not the end of Israel. There was going to be a restoration, the covenant blessing of restoration after exile which Moses himself promised was also reaffirmed by Amos.

Micah

The fourth prophet to deal with the Assyrian judgment was Micah. Micah 1:1 says that he ministered during the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, the kings of Judah, concerning Samaria and Jerusalem. Micah served as God's prophet from at least 735 B.C., the last year of Jotham's reign, to 701, the days of the Sennacherib invasion. Unlike Hosea and Amos, Micah ministered in Judah, especially in the vicinity of Jerusalem. Put simply, Micah's message was that God was going to judge both Samaria and Jerusalem by the hands of the Assyrians. He had little hope that Samaria would escape out of destruction, and he also warned that Jerusalem was going to be destroyed. During the

Sennacherib invasion, Micah opposed false prophets who said that Jerusalem could never be destroyed by an enemy. He argued that Jerusalem would be destroyed if repentance did not take place. Even so, Micah held out hope to Israel and to Judah that even if exile occurred, one day God would retaliate against her enemies and he would free his people from the oppression of the Assyrian and bring a great king to reunite the people and to restore their covenant blessings in the land.

Nahum

The fifth prophet who ministered during the period of the Assyrian judgment was Nahum. The time of Nahum's ministry is not stated explicitly in his book, but it can be inferred from the materials in his book. His ministry took place between 663 B.C. and 612 B.C. Two verses in his book establish the range of possibilities. In 3:8 we discover that the Egyptian city of Thebes had already been conquered by the Assyrians, and this event took place in 663 B.C. Yet the prophet also foretells the destruction of Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, and he speaks of it as a future event in 3:7. Nineveh's destruction took place in 612 B.C., so we know that his ministry took place before that great event.

We read in 1:15 that Nahum addressed Judah, so we may be confident that he did minister in Judah, but Nahum focuses his attention not on Judah, but on Assyria. Both Israel and Judah had suffered severely at the hands of Assyria by this time, and in the midst of this suffering, Nahum had one primary message: God was going to destroy Assyria. He assures Judah that God will punish Assyria by destroying the capital city of Nineveh. As we read in 3:5-7, Yahweh says these words:

“I am against you,” declares the Lord Almighty... “I will treat you with contempt and make you a spectacle. All who see you will flee from you and say, ‘Nineveh is in ruins’” (Nahum 3:5-7).

Isaiah

The sixth prophet to focus on the Assyrian Judgment was Isaiah. Isaiah 1:1 mentions that Isaiah ministered during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. This registry of kings tells us that Isaiah served from around 740 B.C. at least to slightly after 701 B.C., the Sennacherib invasion. We can see that Isaiah ministered through the time of the Syrian-Israelite coalition, the fall of Samaria, and the Sennacherib invasion. The content of Isaiah's book reveals that he ministered in Judah, especially in Jerusalem. Isaiah dealt with Judah in many ways during the time of Assyrian Judgment. He called for fidelity and trust in Yahweh during the Syrian-Israelite coalition. During the Sennacherib invasion, Isaiah led King Hezekiah to trust Yahweh for the deliverance of Jerusalem. These portions of his ministry had one main message: Judah must trust Yahweh as she faced Assyrian judgments. Of course, when the Israelites did not trust Yahweh, Israel had another warning: exile will come to Judah. Yet like so

many other prophets, Isaiah affirmed that the restoration of Judah would take place after the exile.

So we've seen that the period of the Assyrian Judgment had several major events that had significant consequences for the ministries of the prophets. The prophets knew that this was going to be a time of great misery and hardship for the people of God. And they came with words of judgments, but also words of encouragement that a brighter day was on the horizon.

Now that we have explored how Old Testament prophets ministered during the period of Assyrian judgment, we must now turn to the period of the Babylonian judgment.

BABYLONIAN JUDGMENT

So far we've seen that the early monarchy formed a background for all of the writing prophets of the Old Testament. We've also seen that the Assyrian judgment of 734 to 701 B.C. formed the historical context within which Jonah, Hosea, Amos, Micah, Nahum and Isaiah ministered. Now we come to the third major period of prophetic ministry, the Babylonian judgment. This period of judgment extended from 605 B.C. to 539 B.C.

In many ways the prophet Isaiah forms a hinge between the period of Assyrian judgment and Babylonian judgment. We've already seen that Isaiah ministered to Hezekiah during the days of the Sennacherib invasion. Well, after this invasion was over, Hezekiah tried to make an alliance with the Babylonians to protect themselves from further attacks. In chapter 39 of Isaiah, the prophet discovers what Hezekiah had done. And so he says these words in 39:5-7:

Hear the word of the Lord Almighty: The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your fathers have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon... Some of your descendants ... will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon (Isaiah 39:5-7).

Once again we'll divide our discussion into two concerns: first, what were the major events of the Babylonian judgment, and second, how did the prophets minister during this time? Let's look first at the major events that comprised the Babylonian judgment.

MAJOR EVENTS

To understand this period, we must identify three major events: the first Babylonian incursion of 605 B.C., the second incursion of 597 B.C., and the third incursion of 586 B.C.

First Incursion

First, in 605 B.C., there was the first incursion and deportation of Judaite leaders to Babylon. The king Jehoiakim was unfaithful to his Babylonian suzerain, Nebuchadnezzar, so Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah and removed many of the leaders in Jerusalem. The prophet Daniel and his friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, were among those deported at this time.

Second Incursion

The second major event of this period occurred in 597 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar responded to continuing rebellion in Judah with a second incursion and deportation. At this time, he destroyed much of Judah and took a good number of the population into exile into Babylon. The prophet Ezekiel was taken away in this deportation. This second incursion hurt the nation of Judah in many ways, but the nation still did not repent of its evil ways.

Third Incursion

The third major event of the Babylonian period occurred 586 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar had enough of continuing rebellion in Judah and he made a third and final incursion and deportation. This time, the Babylonians utterly destroyed Jerusalem and its holy temple. The vast majority of people in Judah were taken into exile, and the land was left desolate, and a great exile of Judah was under way.

When we think about these three major events during the Babylonian judgment, we must remember that this was a time of utter destruction for the people of God. The son of David was taken off into exile, and the temple of Jerusalem was destroyed. It was a terrible time in the history of God's people.

Now that we've seen the major events of the Babylonian period, we should consider the ways in which Old Testament prophets ministered at these times.

PROPHETIC MINISTRIES

The Babylonian judgment provides an historical context for a number of Old Testament prophets. In fact, seven prophets served as Yahweh's emissaries at this time: Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Joel, Obadiah, Habakkuk, Ezekiel, and Daniel.

Jeremiah

The first prophet of the Babylonian period was Jeremiah. Jeremiah served as God's prophet in Judah throughout the three invasions and deportations. As we read in Jeremiah 1:2-3, Jeremiah ministered

... in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah ... through the reign of Jehoiakim ... down to the fifth month of the eleventh year of Zedekiah ... when the people of Jerusalem went into exile (Jeremiah 1:2-3).

From these verses we see that Jeremiah served from about 626 B.C., even before the Babylonians had defeated the Assyrians, and he continued to serve as Yahweh's emissary at least until shortly after 586 when the final Babylonian incursion and deportation took place.

Before the Babylonians first invaded, Jeremiah called for true repentance to forestall the invasions. As the waves of Babylonian attacks continued, Jeremiah learned that Jerusalem's doom was certain. He called for the people to repent and to prepare for years of hardship. Even so, despite his focus on the Babylonian exile, Jeremiah also affirmed that Israel would be restored some day in the future. For instance, in chapters 30–31 of his book, Jeremiah reminded the people of Judah that God would bring them back to the land and establish them in safety under a new covenant.

Zephaniah

The second prophet of the Babylonian judgment was Zephaniah. Zephaniah 1:1 tells us explicitly when he served as God's prophet. He served during the reign of Josiah, son of Amon, King of Judah. Josiah reigned over Judah from about 640 B.C. to 609 B.C., and this makes Zephaniah a contemporary of Jeremiah's early ministry. In 2:13-15, Zephaniah predicted that Nineveh would fall as it did to the Babylonians. In fact, Zephaniah predicted that the day of the Lord was coming against Assyria and other nations who had persecuted the people of God. He anticipated the Babylonian dominance over the entire region, including Judah. Even so, Zephaniah also proclaimed that the day would come when Israel and Judah would be restored to greatness. As he says in 3:20:

“At that time I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home. I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes,” says the Lord (Zephaniah 3:20).

Joel

A third prophet who appears during the Babylonian Judgment is Joel. We cannot be dogmatic about the date of Joel's ministry because his book does not give us a specific time for his ministry. Some interpreters place Joel earlier, others place him later. Yet from 1:13 and a number of other references, we can be sure that the temple and the priesthood were in operation as Joel preached. Joel also announces that the destruction of Zion will come in 2:1. So Joel probably ministered sometime during the deportations of the Judeans to Babylon. His message was straightforward — the land of Judah was going

to be ravished by foreign armies. And in chapter 2, Joel called for repentance and the hope that sincere repentance might forestall or soften the Babylonian destruction. Yet after concluding that destruction was coming, Joel did not give up entirely on God's blessing. He assured his readers that once the exile was over, God would restore his people to a time of unsurpassed covenant blessing. As he says in Joel 3:20-21:

“Judah will be inhabited forever and Jerusalem through all generations. Their bloodguilt, which I have not pardoned, I will pardon.” The Lord dwells in Zion! (Joel 3:20-21).

Obadiah

A fourth prophet during the Babylonian judgment was Obadiah. His book is not specifically dated either, but it concentrates on how the nation of Edom took advantage of the terrible suffering of the Judaites. In all likelihood, Obadiah had in mind the troubles that came to the Judaites during the waves of invasions and deportations which Babylon inflicted on Judah during the years of 597 to 586 B.C. Obadiah announced that Yahweh will not overlook the cruelties of the Edomites. Edom will be destroyed. In fact, he announced that one day the exiles of Judah would return and take possession of Edom. As Obadiah says in verse 15 of his book:

The day of the Lord is near for all nations. As you have done, it will be done to you; your deeds will return upon your own head (Obadiah 15).

Obadiah proclaimed that after Judah's exile was over, God would punish the nations for their mistreatment of his people.

Habakkuk

A fifth prophet who ministered during the Babylonian judgment was Habakkuk. Once again, we don't know precisely when he ministered, yet the content of his book gives us some guidance. In the first chapter of Habakkuk, the prophet prays for the destruction of godless rulers in Judah. God's response is found in 1:6. There the Lord says:

I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own (Habakkuk 1:6).

In light of this passage, it seems likely that Habakkuk ministered sometime near the first Babylonian invasion and deportation in 605 B.C.

Habakkuk first lamented the evil of the Judaites, then he lamented the oppression of the Babylonians, but in the end of his book, Habakkuk affirmed his trust in Yahweh, no matter how long it took for God to destroy the Babylonians. In 3:17-18, we read those well-known words of faith:

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stall, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior (Habakkuk 3:17-18).

Ezekiel

A sixth prophet to serve during the Babylonian period was Ezekiel. Chapter 1 verse 2 of Ezekiel tells us that the prophet was taken to Babylon in 597 B.C. He ministered in Babylon among the exiles, and as the rest of this book makes clear, Ezekiel ministered even through the great destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. So Ezekiel ministered from around 597 through the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. Ezekiel spent most of his early ministry proclaiming that the Babylonians were going to destroy Jerusalem and its temple. Beyond this, much of the book of Ezekiel focuses on how the people will return to the land and how they must rebuild the temple when they return. After describing how the city and the temple will be grand beyond belief, he closed his book in this way in 48:35:

And the name of the city from that time on will be: The Lord is there (Ezekiel 48:35).

Daniel

The seventh prophet to minister during the Babylonian judgment was Daniel. Daniel was taken to Babylon in the first deportation of 605 B.C. References to events in his book make it clear that Daniel's ministry extended at least from 605 to 539 B.C. Daniel interpreted dreams and had several visions of his own that made it clear that Judah's exile was going to be extended for a long period of time. He realized that the people of God had not repented of their sins, even in the exile, so as he says in 9:13:

Just as it is written in the Law of Moses, all this disaster has come upon us, yet we have not sought the favor of the Lord our God by turning from our sins and giving attention to your truth (Daniel 9:13).

As a result, Daniel learned that the exile of God's people would extend through four kingdoms: the Babylonians, the Medes and Persians, the Greeks, and a fourth unnamed nation which we now know was the Roman Empire. Daniel encouraged repentance and

faith among the exiles and warned that continuing rebellion would only prolong separation from the land.

It would be very difficult to overemphasize the Babylonian judgment. This was a time when the people of God suffered their worst defeat; the people of God were exiled out from the land of Judah; the son of David was exiled from his throne; the city of Jerusalem was destroyed and even the temple of God was destroyed. This was the worst thing that ever happened to the people of God in the Old Testament. And during this time, the prophets offered many words of warning and judgment, but they also offered the hope that one day the Lord would restore his people even to Jerusalem and Judah.

So far in this lesson on the historical analysis of the prophets, we've seen the major events and the prophetic ministries in three periods. Now we come to the last period of Old Testament prophecy, the period of restoration.

RESTORATION PERIOD

As we've seen, the early monarchy provided the background for the writing prophets of the Bible. A number of prophets ministered during the Assyrian judgment, and even more served God during the Babylonian judgment. Now we should explore the prophets who ministered to God's people when some Israelites actually returned from exile in Babylon to the land of Judah. We may speak of this restoration period extending from 539 B.C. to around 400 B.C. We will explore this period in our usual way by focusing first on the major events of that time and then the prophetic ministries. Let's look first at the major events of the restoration period.

MAJOR EVENTS

The first thing we should mention is the return of the Israelites to the land.

Israelites Return to the Land

In 539 and 538 B.C., God did a wonderful thing for his exiled people. In fulfillment of the prophecies in Isaiah, the Persian emperor Cyrus conquered the Babylonian empire and encouraged the Israelites to return to their land and rebuild the temple of Yahweh. This initial restoration of the people from exile took place under the leadership of Sheshbazzar, who many think was Zerubbabel, the rightful heir of David's throne. The exiles who returned, however, were relatively few in number, and they were not firmly devoted to doing Yahweh's will.

Rebuilding of the Temple

Now, this fact brings us to the second major event during the restoration period, the rebuilding of the temple during the years 520 to 515 B.C. The Israelites who first

returned to the land neglected rebuilding the temple. They began the project, but soon became preoccupied with their own needs and stopped building. Because the people of God were failing in their responsibility to rebuild the temple, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah stepped onto the streets of Jerusalem around 520 B.C. to exhort the people to rebuild the temple of God. At first there was great optimism and great hope, but that optimism did not last long.

Widespread Apostasy

The third great event of the restoration period was widespread apostasy. Now, this apostasy grew after the initial rebuilding of the temple, especially during the ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah. Scholars debate the precise dates of this period, so we should set a range of possibilities from around 450 to 400 B.C. Within one generation after Zerubbabel had rebuilt the temple, the people of God began to intermarry with foreign women, and as a result, the religion of Israel was mixed with the religions of other peoples. The restoration period ground to a halt. Now Ezra and Nehemiah did have a few reforms and they worked for a while, but it wasn't long even before those reforms failed. The restoration period became a period of great apostasy.

We may now turn to our second concern with the restoration period. How did these events influence the prophets who ministered at this time?

PROPHETIC MINISTRIES

Three well-known prophetic figures were Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. Let's first consider the ministry of Haggai.

Haggai

The book of Haggai makes it very plain that this prophet was among those who had returned to the land. As a result, his ministry took place in Jerusalem. Beyond this, we know rather precisely when Haggai ministered. We read in Haggai 1:1 that God spoke through Haggai on the first day of the sixth month to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah. From this and other passages in the book of Haggai, we learn that all of Haggai's prophecies were given during a four-month period in 520 B.C.

Now what was Haggai's basic message? Haggai was determined to inspire the floundering Judaites to rebuild the temple. In fact, Haggai predicted that great victories and blessings would come to Zerubbabel if he and the people would repent of their sins. As he says in 2:21:

Tell Zerubbabel governor of Judah that I will shake the heavens and the earth (Haggai 2:21).

Haggai offered God's rich blessings to the people if the nation would sincerely turn back to the Lord and rebuild his temple.

Zechariah

The second prophet of the restoration period was Zechariah. From the content of Zechariah's prophecies, we learn that he ministered in Jerusalem alongside of Haggai. Chapter 1 verse 1 mentions that Haggai began to minister in the eighth month of the second year of Darius, in other words, in the year 520 B.C. And from the content of chapters 9–14 of Zechariah, many interpreters believe that Zechariah's ministry continued after it became clear that simply rebuilding the temple was not sufficient to bring divine blessing. In his early ministry, summarized in the first eight chapters of Zechariah, the prophet's message was very simple: great blessings will come if the people will rebuild the temple. Beyond this, however, in chapters 9–14, Zechariah predicted that full restoration would come only by a catastrophic, future, divine intervention. The prophet had visions of a great series of events in the future when God would intervene and bring victory and righteousness to his people. As he said in 14:20:

On that day "Holy to the Lord" will be inscribed on the bells of the horses, and the cooking pots in the Lord's house will be like the sacred bowls in front of the altar (Zechariah 14:20).

Malachi

Now, the last prophet of the Old Testament was Malachi. From his focus on the temple and the Levites, it's apparent that Malachi also ministered in the vicinity of Jerusalem. His message fits best during or after the time of Nehemiah's reforms, somewhere between 450 and 400 B.C. The temple services had become so corrupted, and the people had turned so far away from the Lord that Malachi announced a great judgment was still coming against the people of God. As we read in Malachi 3:5:

[The Lord] will come near to you for judgment (Malachi 3:5).

Yet Malachi knew that the judgment of God in the future would also lead to the final restoration for the righteous in Israel. In 4:2, Malachi offers hope for those who repent and prove to be faithful to the Lord:

For you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall (Malachi 4:2).

Malachi assured Israel, even in her apostasy, that after judgment would come a time of great blessing.

The prophets of the restoration period had to deal with a great crisis. The people of God who had come back from exile continued to rebel against God, and as a result, the prophets finally concluded that the great restoration blessings would come only in the distant future. Now, as Christians, we know when this distant future came — it was when Jesus came to the earth.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have explored an historical analysis of Old Testament prophets. Although the history is very complex, it is helpful to summarize the events of the prophetic history in terms of four major periods: first, the early monarchy; second, the Assyrian judgment; third, the Babylonian judgment; and fourth, the post-exilic period, the time when there were high initial hopes but eventually the hopes gave way to the expectation of a further judgment followed by a distant blessing from God.

As we learn to interpret Old Testament prophecy, it's always essential to relate their words to their circumstances. As we relate the words of prophets to the historical circumstances they faced, we'll be able to understand what their words meant for the people of those days, and we'll also be able to understand what their words mean for us today.

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He Gave Us Prophets

LESSON
FIVE

Historical Analysis of
Prophecy
Faculty Forum



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He Gave Us Prophets

Lesson Five: Historical Analysis of Prophecy

Faculty Forum

With

Dr. Richard E. Averbeck
Dr. Todd Borger
Dr. David Correa
Mr. Sherif Atef Fahim
Dr. Russell T. Fuller

Rev. Sherif Gendy
Rev. Michael J. Glodo
Dr. Carol Kaminski
Dr. Craig S. Keener
Prof. Mumo Kisau

Dr. Chip McDaniel
Dr. John Oswalt
Dr. Donna Petter
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.
Dr. Seth Tarrer

Question 1:

What are the consequences of ignoring the historical situation of biblical prophecy?

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

There's a very important sense in which the word of God, given through his prophets in the Old Testament, is timeless. And by that we mean that it was true when it was first given, it continues to be true, and it always will be true, because God does not make mistakes. His prophets don't make mistakes. They do not lie; they do not misrepresent him. That's what we mean when we say that the Bible is the word of God, and it's timeless. But we don't mean by that is that the Bible was not written for historical circumstances. In reality, the Bible was written very much to apply the basic beliefs of Israel to Israel at particular times. Israel believed fundamentally that God is the king and he's building his kingdom on the earth, and that he is going to administer this kingdom by means of his covenants. But Bible books, including the Prophets, take that basic belief about God's kingdom and that basic belief about God's covenants, and they apply those truths to the situations that the prophets were in. Even when they talk about distant future events, they're still talking about those events for the people to whom they're speaking in a particular situation. And so, to understand the timeless significance of biblical prophecies — what they mean for us today and what they will always mean for God's people — we have to go back to, as much as we can, go back to the days when the prophets first uttered those words, because they were not talking nonsense to people. They were talking about things that, at least, made at least some sense to the people to whom they were speaking. Even when Daniel says, "I can't understand this..." At one time he just throws his hands up and says, "I can't understand it!" Well, it was still true for him and still relevant for him because it was talking about things that were still going to give hope to Israel in the future and those sorts of things. He knew that something good was going to come from all of this. It was just, "I can't get the details of this. This is beyond me right now." And that's the way it is with prophecy very often. It's timeless in its significance. It's always the eternal word of God. But at the same time, even when the original audience could not quite get the details of what was being said, it

still impacted them. And for us to understand how it should impact us, we need to go back and understand how it was first designed to impact them.

Dr. Craig S. Keener

If we ignore the historical situation of biblical prophecy we can sometimes come up with strange interpretations. For example, you have in Scripture, sometimes it talks about “the abomination of desolation.” Well, the principle is repeatable. I mean, when Israel sinned, their temple would often be desecrated or destroyed. It happened more than once in history. But sometimes, we read those things as if they’re specific future predictions, and in the context, like in Matthew 24, for example, it seems to be speaking to some things that would happen within that generation. You have some other examples where the ignoring of historical context can make some really serious, even economic difficulties. For example, in Deuteronomy 33:24 you have Moses’ blessing of the tribes, and at one point it speaks of oil in the region of Asher. So, a few decades ago some Christian oilmen said, “Hey, it talks about oil in the region of Asher... Let’s go drill there.” They spent a lot of money, money that could be used for spreading the gospel, money that could be used for feeding the poor, but they spent this money because they knew they would get it back. They drilled in the region of Asher. The problem was that, for all the money they spent drilling, they didn’t actually spend much time paying attention to the historical context of the text. You see, the oil that it refers to was not petroleum; it was olive oil.

Question 2:

What do we know of David’s character after he took the throne in Jerusalem?

Dr. John Oswalt

In the books of Samuel, David’s character is really displayed in a remarkable way. His righteousness as he takes over the throne is one of these elements. Unlike so many kings who would be destroying any remnant of the opposing family, David finds Jonathan’s crippled son and brings him into the palace, gives him a lifelong pension. You also see it in his grief over the death not only of Jonathan but over Saul. When these guys come and report the news of Saul’s death, thinking they’re going to be rewarded, they’re not rewarded at all, so that there’s this real sense in which David is saying, “I have become king, not through my efforts or through my rights. I’ve become king by the gift of God, and I cannot over-assume my own position in that.”

Dr. Richard E. Averbeck

In his rise to power, King David came up as a young man who was anointed and who loved the Lord, showed it by all sorts of ways in which he wrote songs and so on. And one of the things that stood out is he really was a man after God’s own heart. And as he continued to grow in that, that kept being tested by Saul’s resistance to his anointing and all the things that went on with that through his life, and he remained faithful. When it comes into 2 Samuel, when he is established as the king, again, he’s

loyal and faithful to the Lord, but he doesn't stay focused sometimes on what the Lord has given him to do and what it would mean to be genuine before the Lord. This shows up in some of the ways he handled his family in terms of his sons, not handling some of the bad things that happened in a way that was really godly. And also, of course, with the Bathsheba and Uriah incident, things degenerated. Now, he remained faithful to the Lord, he kept going back to the Lord. One of the things, though, we learn from David's life for us is that even a man after God's own heart can commit some of the worst possible sinful acts. And we need to keep that in mind and remember that we need to take heed lest we fall.

Prof. Mumo Kisau

King David was a sinner, and as a sinner, if you will, if you'll remember, he even took somebody's wife, even made somebody to die because of his sin. But King David was a good man because he was easy to confess. The Bible says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us." And therefore, King David, when he was told by Nathan what had happened to this man who took somebody else's little lamb, he said, "Who could that be?" and "He should be put to death." And Nathan said, "It is you. You took a man's wife." And because of that, he began to weep and ask for forgiveness. He was just a man after God's own heart, because if you read Psalm 51, there Psalm 51 it is written in a confession mode. He is asking God, "Please forgive me. Don't take your Holy Spirit from me. I am a man, you know, born of sin and among men of sin. Please forgive me." And, therefore, eventually you'll see King David was a warrior, and he was able to defend his people, but at the same time he was obedient and willing to confess. And the Bible says a contrite heart God will not despise, will not leave. And that is what we learn from King David. He was a wonderful king for the children of Israel.

Question 3:

Why did the nation of Israel divide into two nations: Israel and Judah?

Mr. Sherif Atef Fahim, translation

The nation of Israel divided into two nations: the northern kingdom, called Israel, and the southern kingdom, called Judah. This division took place because of two historical events. The main reason was because of Solomon. Solomon had gone astray from worshiping the living God. He married many foreign women who worshiped other gods, and they turned Solomon's heart away. God told him, "I will divide your kingdom for turning away from me. Yet for the sake of David your father I will not do it in your days, but I will tear it out of the hand of your son." The second clear reason the division took place was in the days of Rehoboam, historically in the days of Rehoboam, the son of Solomon. Rehoboam was a young king when he succeeded his father. Solomon had wearied the people with taxes, so the people complained to Rehoboam. They said, "Your father wearied us with taxes. Make them lighter." The elders of Israel said to Solomon, "They are right. You have to make the taxes lighter." Rehoboam did not, however, listen to the elders' advice, and he went with the advice

of his friends, the young men he'd grown up with. They advised him, "You have to show them that you are tougher than your father." And this was exactly Rehoboam's response. He said to the people, "I am stronger than my father, and I will weary you more than my father did." As a result, the people rebelled against him, and the kingdom was divided into the northern kingdom, which included the ten tribes that left Rehoboam to be governed by Jeroboam, and the southern kingdom, which included two tribes — the tribes of Judah and Benjamin — governed by Rehoboam.

Dr. Todd Borger

After the reign of David, his son Solomon became king, and we see this transition moving from the book of Samuel, the end of the book of Samuel into the beginning of the book of Kings... The story of Solomon did not end well, and as a result of that, the kingdom divided into northern and southern kingdoms. We actually have two versions of the story that happened, but I think they're both true, obviously, but if we're reading in the book of Kings, what we find is that Solomon, in his reign, did some very specific things that the law said not to do as the king... And so, we have this really difficult passage ... where God says, "I'm taking the kingdom away from Solomon, but because of the covenant that I made with David, I'm not going to do it in Solomon's lifetime, but I'm going to do it in the life of his son. And also because of the covenant I made with David, I'm not going to take all of the kingdom, but I'm going to keep one tribe back with David, but my people, I'm giving to someone else." And so, it doesn't happen in Solomon's lifetime, but in the reign of his son Rehoboam then. Then you have the actual events that come about to cause it, where Rehoboam doesn't listen to his elders, and he gathers all of his young friends together, and the story is told about how the northern kingdom rebels. So, when I say there's two stories here, we can go to the events that happened with Rehoboam, and there were very specific events that led to this, a rebellion, if you want to call it, of the northern kingdom, where they left and formed their own nation. But theologically, we have to go back to Solomon because that's where the real cause was underneath this. The human events transpired with Rehoboam and his foolishness, but the theological reason for the division goes back to Solomon, and it goes back to God's declaration that because of Solomon's idolatry he is going to take the kingdom and give it to someone else.

Question 4:**What was the Syrian-Israelite coalition, and why was it formed?****Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

The coalition between the country Syria — that corresponds basically to modern-day Syria — and Israel, which is the northern kingdom, the northern regions of the Land of Promise given to Israel, that coalition around 734 B.C. is of great importance in the history of Israel's prophets, because the unthinkable happened. The people of God, the northern kingdom, the northern tribes of Israel, actually made an alliance with Syria, a pagan, demon-worshiping kingdom, and they joined forces together in order

to resist the great Assyrian empire that was threatening them. But worse than that, not just did they form an alliance to resist Assyria, because even Judah did that. They would form alliances with all kinds of people to try to resist great powers that were coming their ways. But it was worse than that. Syria and Israel, that coalition, actually attacked Judah in the days of Ahaz and tried to force Judah to join them in that coalition to resist Assyria. Now, the result of that was predictable. The Assyrians didn't like it, and as a result the Assyrians came in, just years later, and absolutely decimated Syria and brought Israel to its knees, and made them vassals that owed great tribute to the kingdom of Assyria. And in fact, the southern kingdom itself suffered because not only were they attacked by this coalition, but they submitted themselves for protection to the empire of Assyria. The prophet Isaiah had actually told Ahaz, "Don't do that. You seek help from the Lord, and he will protect you from this great coalition that's attacking you." But Ahaz refused. He said, "No, I need help from something that I can see, and that's the Assyrian Empire." So at that time then, Judah itself became a vassal nation of the empire of Assyria.

Dr. Chip McDaniel

The Syrian-Israelite coalition was an agreement between Syria and Israel, the northern kingdom, to try to fend off the Assyrian Empire that was encroaching on its territory. Sometimes because Israel is also known as Ephraim, you'll see it in the literature as the Syro-Ephramaic alliance. To get a handle on this, we really need to look at the geography of the Holy Land. The Holy Land is called "the land in between," and it's between three continents. You have Asia. And then the Fertile Crescent goes up and goes into Egypt. But then you also have Europe. And so, it served as a major trade route, and all of the big dogs in the neighborhood wanted to control those trade routes because they would generate wealth from that. Earlier on in Israel's history the big guns were the Hittites to the northwest and the Egyptians to the southeast. But by the time we get to Jonah, for example, the major player is Assyria. The Syro-Ephramaic alliance or the Israelite-Syrian alliance was from 735 to 722 B.C. We know these because of the chronological markers that are in the text; we can date these very precisely. So it lasted about 13 years... And the Syrian-Israelite alliance was an attempt to join forces to keep Assyria from gaining hegemony over that region. The way that played out is seen to for us in Isaiah 7 and 8 where the king of Judah is concerned because the king of Israel and the king of Syria have allied themselves together against Assyria, and they want Judah to join them. And Isaiah would come to Ahaz and say, "Don't worry about these kings or these kingdoms, God's going to take care of it." The way that played out chronologically is in 735 Isaiah says to King Ahaz, the king of the south, "Don't worry about these kingdoms because a child is going to be born, and before that child can, with discernment, say 'my father and my mother' the tribute is going to have to be taken from ... Syria and Israel and is going to go to Assyria." And so, it's a way of saying they're going to be humbled. They're going to be, the two kingdoms that are in agreement here, they're going to be humbled, they're going to be impoverished by the king of Assyria. He also says in chapter 7 that before a child is born and reaches the ability to make moral categories, moral decisions on his own, the kings are going to be gone, they're going to be out of there, meaning that there's no more kingdoms to worry about. So, the

message to Ahaz that Isaiah gives is, “You trust God. Don’t worry about these kingdoms. Don’t join them against Assyria. Don’t worry about them because God’s going to take care of them.” And how that played out historically is that in 735 the alliance was made between Israel and Syria. In 732, Assyria came in and took Syria into captivity and received tribute from Israel. And 10 years later, about 13 years after the time of the agreement, the king of Assyria comes in and takes the northern kingdom. And so, it only lasted from 735 to 722... It had a major role in helping us to understand Isaiah 7 and 8 where Isaiah is dealing with King Ahaz and saying, “Don’t worry about this alliance, God’s going to take care of it.”

Rev. Sherif Gendy, translation

The Syrian-Israelite coalition was formed between King Pekah, the son of Remaliah, and Rezin, the king of Syria. The purpose of this coalition was to stop the Assyrian march led by Tiglath-Pileser in the eighth century B.C. So, King Pekah, king of Israel, formed this coalition or partnership, with King Rezin, king of Syria, to prevent the Assyrian advance. King Pekah asked Judah to join and help in this coalition during the reign of King Jotham, the son of Uzziah, king of Judah. However, King Jotham refused to join the coalition, and as a result of King Jotham’s rejection, Rezin and Pekah marched to Jerusalem to fight Jerusalem. This was during the reign of King Ahaz, the son of Jotham, in 735 B.C. This war is called the Syro-Ephraimite war, because it was the alliance of Syria and Ephraim, or Israel, against Jerusalem, or against the kingdom of Judah. Although God sent a message of assurance to King Ahaz and asked him to trust the Lord and not be afraid of that war and that coalition, King Ahaz, however, doubted and did not trust the Lord. So, he made an alliance with Tiglath-Pileser to resist this war from the coalition of Syria and Israel.

Question 5:**Why did Israel fall to Assyria?****Dr. Russell T. Fuller**

Israel fell — and we’re talking about the northern half of Israel — fell to Assyria in the year 722, and the reason why they fell was because of their sin. If you look at 2 Kings 17, it goes right into detail; at the end of the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel, it goes into great detail of why God took them into exile. And again, it starts out right off that they forsook the Lord, they went into idolatry, and they wanted to go in the custom of the nations. They wanted to live just like all the other nations lived. And so, they went off into sin. They went off into idolatry. And then, the special sins that are mentioned are, again, this notion of like, again, an ancient abortion practice where they caused their children to pass through the fire. And this was especially something that God was very displeased with and something that God brought his wrath and judgment upon the northern tribes for this. But yet, the Lord at times, for the northern tribes, offered them very much grace and mercy if they would turn to him. Even at the beginning of their dynasty under Jeroboam I, God said, “If you’ll obey me, I will establish you a house much like I did David” — again,

not eternal and so forth, but God was offering them a great reward there. He made the same offer to Jehu, but again, both of them rejected God's offer and mercy of grace, and so did all of the kings of the north, and so it was their apostasy, it was their sin that ultimately led to their destruction in the year 722.

Dr. Carol Kaminski

Yeah, it's very troubling when you think about what happens to this northern kingdom because in 722 the Assyrians come against the north. And of course, the Assyrians are one of Israel's enemies. You see this in the book of Jonah, in the eighth century prophet, and Jonah, the last thing he wants to do is go to Nineveh, which is the major Assyrian city. We also know from the Assyrians there are some incredible wall reliefs. One good example is the Lachish reliefs, and they depict the Assyrians as, they're taking, they're conquering people. They skin people alive. In the city of Lachish, they beheaded people and had their heads hanging around. They're beheading people, some of them cut off hands, impaling people. So, a hideous kind of situation, and it raises the question, why on earth does God use the Assyrians to bring judgment against his own people? Again, if you look at the history of it with the northern kingdom, they'd been worshiping idols for 200 years. This is contrary to the Ten Commandments, it's contrary to the Mosaic covenant, and one of the things God had promised in Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 27, 28 — these blessings and curses — one of the curses is "You're going to go into exile, and you're going to be defeated by your enemies." And so, this really is in fulfillment of those promises and the curses of the covenant because of their disobedience. And what it really does is it underscores the human problem and the problem of sin, and Israel's inability to really keep God's commandments. So, God raises up the Assyrians, they come in. 2 Kings 17 describes this and gives a long, long list of why God brought the Assyrians, and it's not a pretty picture. So, clearly placing it on their own actions for several hundred years.

Mr. Sherif Atef Fahim, translation

God allowed the people of Israel to fall into the hands of the pagan Assyrians. By "Israel" here we mean the northern kingdom, the ten tribes of Israel who were exiled by the Assyrians. Indeed, this was a very difficult matter because the wars launched by the Assyrians were extremely harsh and aggressive. They cruelly destroyed the northern kingdom and the ten tribes. The reason for this, in one word, was sin — all sorts of sin. The people of Israel in the northern kingdom lived in sin from the division of the united kingdom until the exile. There was no time when the people had a good king. All the kings of the northern kingdom were evil, even though God had sent them prophets like Hosea and Amos, and there were prophets who ministered among them like Elijah. Elijah tried to call them to reunite with the southern kingdom and return to Davidic rule. They refused and lived in sin and worshiped foreign gods. As a result, their judgment came sooner than the southern kingdom, and they were exiled by the Assyrians in 722 B.C.

Question 6:**What happened during the Sennacherib invasion of Judah when Hezekiah was king?****Dr. Russell T. Fuller**

One of the ... most important historical events to happen in the history of Israel was when Sennacherib, king of Assyria, came to defeat Hezekiah, king of Judah. Under Hezekiah's father, Ahaz, Judah becomes a vassal state to the Assyrians. But when Sargon II dies in around the year 705 B.C., rebellion takes place all over in Assyria, especially in Babylon in the south under a man named Merodach Baladan — he rebels in the south — and he tries to get, successfully, Hezekiah to rebel on the other side of the kingdom. And so, both guys rebel as Sennacherib comes to the throne after his father Sargon II. Well, he needs to reestablish his kingdom, he comes against Judah, and he takes basically all the cities of Judah. There's really one city left, and that's Jerusalem. And what he does is he basically says, "Your God is like every other god. I will take out the Lord God of Israel just like I took out all the other gods." He talks in a very arrogant way against the Lord God of Heaven, and God says, "I will show Sennacherib my power." And so, what he does is he supernaturally delivers Israel, and what he does is he smites the Assyrian army and 185,000 Assyrian troops will die. He will hear a report of, probably, a rebellion going on back in his land, and he'll have to go back to Assyria. And we know, even from Assyrian annals, that they'll talk about caging up Hezekiah like a bird in a cage, but they never say they defeat him. Now remember, in Assyrian literature, it's pure propaganda. They never admit defeat at all, so by just saying they have him caged up like a bird, they are really admitting they did not defeat him. So, even in the Assyrian records they admit this. This is a very important event. It's mentioned three times in Scripture, in Kings and Chronicles, and then finally in the book of Isaiah. So, when you see something mentioned three times in Scripture this is very important. During the time of Jeremiah it's going to be mentioned because the people at that time are saying, "Hey, as long as we have the temple, God will deliver us from that." And, of course, what Jeremiah will say is, "You've got the wrong historical thing. It's not going to be what happened under Hezekiah. It's going to be what happened under Eli." Remember there, the temple, the tabernacle did not save them there, you see? And so, this becomes one of the great deliverances. It's so great in Jewish thought that later rabbis during the Talmudic period will look at Hezekiah and call him Messiah. Now, they don't see him as Messiah, but they see him as a type of messiah in the sense of this great deliverance, supernatural deliverance. So, they'll see him as a messianic type because of this remarkable deliverance by God. And so, again, this is one of the greatest deliverances of God in the Old Testament, perhaps maybe the second greatest one behind, again, the great deliverance against Pharaoh back in the time of Moses.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Hezekiah is known for all kinds of things, but in biblical history, perhaps the most important thing, or the most noted thing that he experienced, was the invasion of the Assyrian, Sennacherib. Sennacherib literally destroyed Judah. People ran for their

lives. You can read about it in Micah 1, the devastation that he brought to the land of Judah. But he went further than that. He actually surrounded and laid siege to Jerusalem, and it looked for a while as if Jerusalem would actually fall to Sennacherib like Samaria in the north had fallen earlier to the Assyrians. It was only because Isaiah persuaded Hezekiah to repent of his sins and to start trusting in God that God sent a plague among the Assyrians, and they all ran home. It was a great miracle event. But that event of the surrounding of Jerusalem, the laying of siege to Jerusalem, the city of God, David's city, the centerpiece of the world, it was of such a crisis that it brought everything to a heightened status in the days of Hezekiah.

Question 7:

What was the prophet Hosea's message to the northern kingdom of Israel?

Rev. Sherif Gendy, translation

The message of the prophet Hosea to the northern kingdom of Israel was a message declaring God's lawsuit against Israel. It proclaimed God's judgment and punishment against Israel because of their sin, because they did not repent, and because they rejected the Lord by worshiping foreign gods. Also, part of this message was exhorting the people to return to the Lord, affirming God's love towards his people, as in chapter 11, and encouraging them to repent and return to the Lord, as we can see in chapter 14.

Dr. David Correa, translation

The prophet Hosea's message to the northern kingdom of Israel, was that all these calamities — the suffering they were experiencing from the Assyrian invasion — were well deserved because of their disobedience, their unfaithfulness, and their idolatry, just as it's described in his book.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

While the book of Hosea has a significant portion of its message directed toward the southern kingdom of Judah, it's also directed substantially to the northern kingdom of Israel, or we might say Ephraim. And the message is, "You have been unfaithful to the covenant." And there are a series of vivid metaphors where we can see this — an unfaithful wife, an illegitimate child, an uncaring mother — there are all these vivid metaphors, and the charges are particularly piled up there in chapter 4. And in spite of their disobedience, God was still going to pursue them, such as Hosea did through his object lesson of marrying Gomer, the prostitute, or the unfaithful wife. But exile was going to happen. That was an inevitability... They had leaned upon a relationship with Syria ... to help protect themselves against the empire of Assyria, and when they did that, they had depended upon human strength rather than on God as their king and defender. And as a cruel irony, the curses of the covenant would lead them into exile in Assyria. So, that exile was inevitable because their covenant-breaking was gross, and it was deep, and it was prolonged, but there is still this message of hope because

Hosea says that God says that “I will take you into the wilderness, and there I will speak kindly to you.” That is, even in bringing his people, bringing about the circumstances of exile, seeing them off into the Assyrian captivity, even still, God had purposes for them, that it was going to be in captivity where they would become receptive to hearing of God’s faithfulness, to turning back to him, and to praying for his salvation and mercy. And so, this is why the book ends so prominently on a note of hope, offering the opportunity for restoration in spite of all that they had done to break God’s covenant.

Question 8:

Why did Judah fall to the Babylonians?

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

The kingdom of Judah fell to the Babylonians for one simple reason: their sins were too great for God to tolerate them anymore. All the way back in the days of Moses, in like Deuteronomy 4, Deuteronomy 28–30, God made it very clear that if the people of God entered into the Promised Land, and they flagrantly violated his covenant, if they disobeyed his law flagrantly over and over, he’d be patient with them. As Leviticus 26 tells us, he would discipline them for their sins, and if they would not repent, then he’d multiply that seven times, and if they still didn’t repent, again seven times, and again seven times, and again seven times. But at the end of this, just like in Deuteronomy 4, Leviticus 26 says, “In the end, if you still have not repented, then I will send you out of the land. I will exile you.” And that had happened already to the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C. But by the time 586 B.C. came, it had happened to Judah as well. And Judah’s problem was, to begin with, that they ignored what happened in the north. They were warned by the prophets, “Look what happened to Samaria. Look what happened to the northern kingdom. It can happen to you too.” I mean, they just didn’t believe it was possible. After all, Jerusalem is the City of David, it’s the favored city of God, it’s the capital of the world, it’s to rise up and be the greatest of all the mountains on the earth. So, they just simply could not believe it. And even after several deportations of Judahite leaders had occurred in the days of Jeremiah, the people were still, according to Jeremiah 7, saying, “Nothing more can happen to us because we have the temple. We have the temple! We have the temple!” And Jeremiah looked at them and said, “What good is the temple going to do to you? What good is it going to give you?” And the answer was, as far as Jeremiah was concerned, and as far as God was concerned, none at all. It would not protect them from his judgment coming against them. And so, as they continued in their idolatry, as they continued to rebel against God in these flagrant ways, God finally determined in the days of Manasseh, according to the book of 2 Kings, he’d had enough, and that they were doomed to suffer a time of judgment in Judah, as well as in the north. And so, Judah was taken away. Jerusalem was destroyed. The population was scattered, and the Babylonians took many of them off into exile for a long time under the judgment of God. It seemed impossible to people at the time that that could happen. I mean, after all, God had delivered Jerusalem in the days of

Hezekiah. He had delivered them from the Assyrians, and they were sure that that meant that God would never allow any foreign nation to dominate them. But, in fact, he did. And they destroyed Jerusalem and Jerusalem lie in ruins for hundreds and hundreds of years until Jesus came and the salvation began. And then, of course as we know, one day Jesus will bring Jerusalem from above down to the earth, and the centerpiece of the world will be restored even greater than it was before, and all nations will flock to him on that day.

Dr. Russell T. Fuller

Yeah, the Babylonians came down on Judah three different times. The first time they came down was in the year 605, and that was in the aftermath of a famous battle that occurred at a place called Carchemish, which was battle between the Babylonians and the Egyptians for who was going to basically succeed the Assyrians as being the dominant military force in the ancient world. The Babylonians won. Now, what happened was that, Josiah, the last righteous king, he went up to try to attack the Egyptian king Neco, but he killed Josiah. And so, what the Egyptians did is they installed one of their puppet kings, which would be the son of Josiah — that was Jehoahaz — but he only lasted for a very short period of time, and the Egyptian king replaced him with Jehoiakim. But it was in the third year of Jehoiakim, and this would be in the year 605, that he decided to rebel against Babylon because Babylon now was the world power instead of Egypt. He decided to rebel against Nebuchadnezzar, and that was a fatal mistake. Nebuchadnezzar comes down; he takes away certain exiles, some of the cream of the crop, to serve him back in Babylon. And one of those individuals was the prophet Daniel. He would go into captivity in the year 605. At the end of Jehoiakim's reign, around the year 597, there is yet another revolt against Nebuchadnezzar — again another mistake — this time by the son of Jehoiakim. His name is Jehoiachin. Again, here comes Nebuchadnezzar, he takes away, again, the cream of the crop, again takes away all craftsmen, you know, anybody who would be of benefit to the Babylonians, he basically took them away. This time the prophet Ezekiel goes into exile in the year 597. Then he installs Zedekiah, and Zedekiah will be the last king of Judah. And at the end of his reign he makes the fatal mistake, again, of rebelling against Nebuchadnezzar — that was never a good move — and so Nebuchadnezzar comes this time, he's had enough. This time he is going to thoroughly destroy Judah. He's going to kill Zedekiah... I mean, take him into exile, kill his sons in front of him and then take him into exile. And so it's, 586 was the real big one with the complete destruction of the temple and so forth. And again, what will be said in the book of Kings, it goes even back to the apostasy of Manasseh and his sin of offering up children in sacrifice. And what God says there is something you rarely see in Scripture: "I will not forgive Judah for the sins of Manasseh" is what is stated there. And so, it's because of sin that they keep rebelling against Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah keeps telling them to submit to the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar, but they rebel against God and so forth, and so God brings down his judgment three different times: in the year 605, 597 and then finally 586.

Dr. David Correa, translation

When the Babylonians attacked Judah, they were the instrument that God finally used to fulfill the warnings that, a long time before, he had given to his people. The Babylonians came and made a series of deportations. And finally, they came and besieged the city and destroyed it completely, just as God had warned. By destroying the city, of course, they destroyed not just the walls, but they destroyed the temple, destroyed the palace, and carried the people of Judah away into captivity, thus completing the warning that God had given to his people in Leviticus, when he said, “If you don’t repent,” again and again, “if you don’t repent, he will increase your punishment until it is the worst of all trials — the judgment of exile.”

Question 9:**What was Joel’s main message?****Dr. Seth Tarrer**

Joel’s message to Judah contains a tension. There’s a tension between the present that Israel and Judah have just experienced — and we see this in chapters 1 and 2 with the plague of locusts — and we see there’s another element of the tension. There’s something future oriented in Joel as well, something pushing out beyond the immediacy of Israel and Judah’s context there in the pre-exilic and exilic period. Rather, it’s pushing to something that’s something akin to universal judgment, as we see towards the end of the book of Joel, in chapter 3. And so, the issue then turns on this idea of “day of the Lord.” So, in Joel, “day of the Lord” is seen locally and immediately in the plague of locusts, as understood to be judgment. However, even intermingled in chapters 1 and 2, there are texts and there are signs in which Joel is speaking not only of Israel’s and their immediate return, but also of a coming universal judgment. And this is interesting because Joel gets taken up, as you know, in the Book of the Twelve, with the Minor Prophets, and Joel is going to use, extensively, he’s going to use the remainder of the prophetic tradition, he’s going to use Obadiah, Isaiah, Amos. And so, by Joel’s use of these older prophetic traditions, these authoritative prophetic traditions, Joel’s message is understood immediately locally for Israel and Judah, yet it’s also meant to be understood and taken up and read in an eschatological register or key that speaks not only to God’s restoration of physical Israel post exile, but also of his coming judgment and eschatological reign.

Dr. Russell T. Fuller

Yeah, Joel’s main message to Judah was one of repentance. God was going to bring a plague that was going to be so great that for generations people were going to talk about this. Now when we hear about this coming plague, to us it doesn’t seem like such a great thing. It’s a locust plague, and to us that just sounds like some grasshoppers on steroids or something that are just out of control. But to them this would have been a terrible plague. Usually locust plagues will come in the springtime, and then sometimes in the fall, when the two harvests are. And so, if you have a locust plague, let’s say, in the springtime, your barley harvest, your wheat

harvest can be completely wiped out. And the difficulty with this, of course, is starvation is going to set in. So, what's being described there is a very serious plague that's going to come, and the main message that Joel has for them is "rend your hearts and not your garments." You know, when disaster would come to them, they would tear their clothes. They would throw dirt upon their head. They would do things that, again, would seem rather odd to us today. But the Lord was like, "No, this time you better tear your hearts." This was the great message of Joel in repentance. And he says, "And maybe the Lord will leave us a remnant behind us so that we can have an offering to the Lord our God. Hopefully God will turn away his wrath. If we'll repent and truly tear our hearts and not just our clothes, if we'll have true repentance maybe God will lessen or maybe he'll even completely wipe it out." And then, he talks about how, "But don't worry," this destruction is not going to be complete and entire. There is going to be a full restoration. And then he goes from restoring them at that time to the restoration of Messiah when what is described there is that he will pour out his Spirit upon all flesh, and even the lowest of the people in society, even the slaves, the Holy Spirit will be poured out even upon them. And then, you see this universal promise, not just to Israel, but to the whole world: "Whosoever will call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." And so, the main message of Joel is one of repentance, but of divine mercy and blessing on a universal scale.

Question 10:

What was Ezekiel's main message to Judah?

Dr. Donna Petter

Ezekiel is a great prophetic book, and he has a really profound message, and it's really specific. It's not just to Judah, but it's to the exiles who are in Babylon. So, Ezekiel finds himself in the middle of a mess. God's people have been deported from Jerusalem to Babylon in the exile of 597 B.C. So, it's a set of circumstances that are really tragic because God's people failed miserably. And Ezekiel is one among the exiles who were deported with Nebuchadnezzar in 597 B.C. And as a result of that exile, God calls Ezekiel in the middle of this mess to speak a word to the exiles, and it's a very specific word... A few years into the exile, God calls Ezekiel to give a message to the exiles, and it's particularly pertaining to the events in Jerusalem, that the city is going to fall, and there is going to be another deportation. And now Ezekiel has to tell that to his audience in Babylon. His audience in Babylon didn't think that the city was going to suffer defeat, and instead, they had a mindset that nothing can touch Jerusalem. So, instead of it being a time to heed the false prophets that said the city was going to be spared, instead of it being a time to be hopeful, Ezekiel is raised up to say, no, in fact death and destruction are coming close to Jerusalem. But this didn't fit the theological grid of the exiles, and the reason it didn't fit the theological grid of the exiles is because they were holding on, and rightfully so, to the promises of God that said Jerusalem was the apple of God's eye, etc. So, they were holding onto these promises, but in fact, they forgot and they didn't realize that the reason why the nation was in the state that it was in had everything to do with their fault. So,

God raises up Ezekiel to give them a correction and to really bring them to the place of understanding, that this is not a time to hope for restoration, but indeed, it really is a time to mourn... And so, in the event that they had mourned and acted like Ezekiel, that wouldn't have changed the circumstances. Jerusalem was still going to be destroyed because of the scroll. God said that he was decreeing mourning, lamentation and woe. But what would have happened had they mourned over sin and over the consequences of their sin, it would have just been a recognition of wrongdoing, and that is something that God was after. He was after a change of heart and a recognition of wrongdoing. And so, Ezekiel's aim then was to get these hardened people, hard-hearted people to mourn over their circumstances even before the Fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C... Even though Ezekiel paints a picture of the reality that it is a time to mourn, that's only part of the story; there is the ending of the book. Because out of mourning, out of death and destruction comes life, and it's because God brings a heart change to the nation and to individuals in the nation. And so, really, out of death then comes life. So, Ezekiel's message is twofold: it is a time to mourn, but it is also a time to rejoice. It's a time to mourn sin and its consequences, it's a time to acknowledge wrongdoing, but then, in God's time, he will bring restoration. And the biggest restoration that they needed was a heart change and a heart transplant. And God says in the final chapters of Ezekiel, that's exactly how he is going to ultimately bring restoration to the nation. So, out of death and destruction Ezekiel promises life, and so the message of Ezekiel is quite profound.

Dr. Seth Tarrer

When we listen to Ezekiel, immediately we're struck by some peculiarities. One, Ezekiel is hard to locate at times. We know he's in exile, he's in Babylon under the sixth-century exile that Judah has experienced, and he's by the river. But other than that, throughout the text, we don't often know exactly to whom he's speaking... This plays a very important role as we read the book of Ezekiel and seek to hear the message. Ezekiel's message is radically theocentric, and it can be seen even in the way in which the book of Ezekiel bounces back and forth between Jerusalem and Babylon, the people of Israel, the elders of Israel, all of Israel, or just whoever is listening to the prophet. So, in some sense, the theocentrically-oriented message of Ezekiel has hearers in all places, in all times. It transcends temporal-spatial boundaries, and Ezekiel then becomes a message that is readily heard and reheard, appropriated, reactualized in subsequent readers and generations of those who would call Ezekiel Holy Scripture. When we look at the text itself, we see 72 times in the book of Ezekiel, the prophet, or the Lord through the prophet, says these things have been done — both judgment and future promise — so that they will know, “I the Lord have spoken in my zeal.” God is concerned, through his actions in history and through the words of his prophet, to concretely demonstrate he is, in fact, the Lord of nations, both in his judgment and in his coming restoration of Israel.

Another theme in the book of Ezekiel that's pretty clearly evident is the idea of God's presence. It leaves early in the book. It leaves the temple, and in that way God is in some ways imaged as not being present with Israel. But that's not the final word. Ezekiel tells us time and again there is a day coming; God, in his mercy, will seek not

only to restore Israel, but God's going to recreate our hearts. There's actually an eschatological push in the book of Ezekiel as we move through, and we read about the way in which God restores all of creation. And the image is powerful. It's of living water. And we see this in Joel, also in Zechariah, that this living water flows from the very throne. Dry bones are made alive again. Things that die are brought back to life... And this is taken up finally in the book of Revelation 22:1-2 where we see the water of life giving life to God's newly re-created world.

Rev. Sherif Gendy, translation

The ministry of the prophet Ezekiel was during the reign of Jehoiachin, king of Judah, between 593 and 573 B.C. The book of Ezekiel is organized chronologically. There is a kind of historical sequence of the events. We see in the first section, from chapter 1–24, Ezekiel prophesying about the Fall of Jerusalem and Judah because of sin, rebellion, and disobedience to the Lord. In the second section, from chapter 25–32, Ezekiel deals with the coming judgment over the nations that participated in the Fall of Jerusalem or that rejoiced over the destruction of Jerusalem. The last section, from 33–48, talks about the hope of restoration, the restoration of the exiled to the Land, and the blessings the Lord promises to give his people — the people of Judah and Jerusalem — after the restoration.

Question 11:

How did the post-exilic prophets address the restoration period in Israel?

Dr. Seth Tarrer

When we listen to the prophets we consider post-exilic, good examples come to us from Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. These are prophets whose oracles are being collected and included in the canonical Scriptures of Israel, after they've been released from exile, towards the end of the sixth century, and they're returning home to what's now a Persian province known as Yehud, okay? So, some of the general themes throughout all of these books, is the sense of a return of the Lord to Zion, or Jerusalem. There's also a theme that crops up again and again, and that is God's victory over the oppressors of his elect people. There's a constant need and desire for a rebuilding of the temple... Along with the rebuilding of the temple as a major theme in these post-exilic prophets, we also see an emerging sense of the desire that Israel intercede or see itself as functioning on behalf of the other nations, that God in some way desires, through Israel, to bless the nations, which, if you think about it makes sense, because in the initial covenant call, God has set up the covenant with Israel as the means by which all the nations of the earth would be blessed. So, it's in Israel's best interest to, in some sense, seek the welfare of the nations because, by doing so, they can avoid themselves being extinguished...

We look at the book of Haggai, and we see the people complaining that it's not quite time to build the house yet — "house" being the temple of the Lord. However, under

the prophet Haggai's urging, he reminds the people that, why should they have nice homes to live in when the Lord himself still does not have a house? And so, under Haggai, we see the call for the temple to be rebuilt. And this call is issued personally to the Persian provincial governor Zerubbabel... Many of these similar themes can also be seen in Zechariah, a parallel prophet, a prophet that's contemporary with Haggai. However, in the book of Zechariah, we also see some distinctive features, particularly the notion of the Lord raising up this anointed one known as "the branch," a title that Zerubbabel never took, but Zechariah does apply to the high priest Joshua in this time of rebuilding. The branch evokes messianic language we've heard from Isaiah before. And so what then, as Haggai and Zechariah are incorporated into the canon, the twelve minor prophets, there's now this forward-looking element of which this branch will restore in typical Davidic idyllic fashion, restore Israel to its proper place before God, among the nations, on behalf of the world...

And in Malachi we see, even in the name itself, there's a sense in which God has something to tell his people still. Malachi means "my messenger," so who knows if it's even someone's name or simply the title of the book because God has a message, and that is, he is preparing the way, and he's going to send someone to prepare the way for him. Interestingly, in the Hebrew Bible, the Prophets are not the end of the canon. The Writings end the canon. However, we as Christians have replaced the Writings with the Prophets, and Malachi butts up neatly and nicely with the book of Matthew. Why? Because Malachi said he's going to send a messenger. The Lord is preparing the way for his return to Zion and Israel's rightful place. That prophet, the messenger that is to come is spoken of as Elijah. Who is Elijah? He was a mysterious ninth century prophet who never died. So, in some sense, there's this continual use of the prophetic tradition to not only recall Israel's past, where they've been; their present, where they are — which is the need to rebuild and restore purity — but there's this forward-looking motion, even by the placement of Malachi at the very end of the Old Testament, pushing us to look for the one who is to come.

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He Gave us Prophets

LESSON
SIX

LITERARY ANALYSIS OF THE PROPHETS



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He Gave us Prophets

Lesson Six

Literary Analysis of the Prophets

INTRODUCTION

I have a number of friends who have committed themselves to reading through the whole Bible in a year. But on more than one occasion, these friends have come to me and said: “Richard, when I begin to read Old Testament prophecy, I feel as if I’m lost in a huge, dark forest.” And that’s the way it is for many of us. We begin to think that we know the prophets, but soon we see that we’re wandering aimlessly because we’re so unfamiliar with the terrain of the Old Testament prophets.

Well, in this lesson we’re going to begin to get a familiarity with the terrain of this part of the Bible. So we’ve entitled this lesson, “Literary Analysis of the Prophets.” In this lesson we’ll focus on three different kinds of literature that we run into all through Old Testament prophecy: first, historical narratives, stories that record events that took place in the prophets’ lives; second, communication with God, passages that record the prayers and the praises of the prophets as they addressed God; and, third communication with people, the speeches which the prophets directed to their fellow human beings. Understanding how these different kinds of literature appear in prophetic books will provide us with a map that will lead us to the treasures that await us in this part of the Bible. Let’s take a look first at historical narratives.

HISTORICAL NARRATIVES

Everyone likes a good story. That’s why we read books and go to the movies. It’s because stories do more than inform us. They also awaken our imaginations and change us in ways that are unimaginable at times. Well, when we think about the Bible, we know there are many stories or narratives in the Bible, but usually we allocate the narratives to books like Genesis and Exodus and Numbers. But we must also see that there are many narratives even in the prophetic books of the Old Testament.

Historical narratives absolutely dominate the terrain of several Old Testament prophetic books. At the top of the list is Jonah. From the beginning to the end, it tells the story of Jonah and his ministry to the city of Nineveh. A large portion of the book of Daniel is also historical narrative. Daniel’s visions and prophecies are set within the context of historical events. Beyond this, a number of chapters in books like Jeremiah and Ezekiel also form historical accounts. And to a lesser degree, narratives also appear interspersed here and there in books like Hosea and Amos and Isaiah. As we study Old Testament prophets, we must always be on the lookout for historical narratives. They form important parts of many books.

We'll explore the role of historical narratives in prophecy by focusing on two matters: first, the types of narratives we encounter; and second, the content of these narratives. Let's look first at the types of narratives we run into in the prophetic books.

TYPES OF NARRATIVES

Old Testament prophecies contain two basic types of narratives: biography and autobiography. Just as these terms normally indicate, biographies are accounts from a third person point of view and autobiographies are told from the first person point of view.

Biography

In some cases, both biographical and autobiographical accounts appear in the very same book. For example, the first six chapters of Daniel report a number of events in Daniel's life from a third person biographical point of view. In chapter 1, we learn of Daniel's training in Babylon. In chapter 2, we learn of Nebuchadnezzar's dream of a great statue and Daniel's interpretation of that dream. Chapter 3 is the story of the famous fiery furnace, and chapter 4 reports Nebuchadnezzar's dream of a tree and Daniel's interpretation. And then, chapter 5 reports the well-known time when Belshazzar saw handwriting on the wall, and chapter 6 is an account of Daniel in the lion's den. All of these chapters take the shape of biography. They form third person narratives about the Old Testament prophet Daniel.

Autobiography

Although the first six chapters of Daniel are biographical, chapters 7–12 take a turn toward autobiography. Short introductions begin each section, but the terrain is dominated by first-person accounts. Daniel himself reports what happens to him in his own words. Chapter 7 reports Daniel's own account of the dream of four beasts. In chapter 8 Daniel tells about his vision of a ram and a goat. Chapter 9 contains an autobiographical account of Daniel's prayer for the exiles to return to the land. And chapters 10–12 amount to an autobiographical record of Daniel's vision of the future for God's people.

As we study Old Testament prophecy, we're going to run into many biographies and many autobiographies, and we must always be aware of these genres when we come upon them. Old Testament writers wrote in narrative form so that they could teach their lessons indirectly to us, and if we miss these genres, we'll miss the important messages they have to give to us.

Having seen that historical narratives form a vital part of the prophetic books, we're now in a position to ask another question: what were the basic contents of these records?

CONTENT OF NARRATIVES

Throughout the prophets we find that narratives focus in four basic directions: first, the prophetic call; second, symbolic actions; third, vision reports; and fourth, historical backgrounds.

Prophetic Call

A prophetic call is a report of the times when God commissioned prophets to speak on his behalf. This kind of record appears in a number of key passages. For example, Isaiah 6 reports God's call to Isaiah. Jeremiah 1 tells us how God called Jeremiah to represent God's covenant. And similarly, in Ezekiel 2, we learn that God called Ezekiel to serve him in a very special way. In each of these passages, we find stories or narratives, and we learn about the prophet's humility before God and how the prophets were assured that God had authorized their ministries.

The stories of a prophet's call were designed to validate or to demonstrate that God had called prophets to do his bidding. And this was important because Old Testament prophets often said things that were not very popular or easy to accept. And we must always remember that these stories validated that God had called these men to serve him. As we listen to the Old Testament prophets, we're going to hear things that we don't like and we don't want to accept, but we must remember that prophets were called by God.

Symbolic Actions

Historical narratives in the prophetic books also focus on the symbolic actions of prophets. Many times God called his spokesmen to perform certain actions that took on symbolic value for their ministries. For example, in Jeremiah 13, the prophet was told to go bury his linen belt until it rotted in order to illustrate the corruption of Judah. In chapter 19, Jeremiah was told to buy a clay jar and break it in the presence of the elders as a symbol of what was going to happen to Judah. And in chapter 32, God instructed Jeremiah to buy land and to keep the deed safe as a sign to assure the people of God that one day God would bring his people back to the land.

These examples in the book of Jeremiah are just a few of the many symbolic actions that take place in the prophetic books. Books like Hosea and Ezekiel are full of such events. In the Old Testament, the people of God were able to see with their eyes what God was saying through the words of the prophets. And as we read these records, we can see with our eyes what God was saying through the prophets as well.

Vision Reports

In addition to records of prophets' calls and symbolic actions, we run into a third kind of historical narrative in the prophetic books — vision reports. Vision reports are

those passages where the prophet describes a visual encounter with God. One very important series of vision reports appears in Amos 7:1-9. This passage is actually a report of three visions. First, in 7:1-3, the Lord shows Amos a swarm of locusts about to destroy northern Israel, but Amos offered a response to this vision. In 7:2 he said these words:

**Sovereign Lord, forgive! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!
(Amos 7:2).**

Amos was concerned that not even a remnant of God's people would live through such a terrible locust plague. And so, in verse 3, God relented and decided not to send the locusts.

In much the same way, in chapter 7 of Amos, verses 4-6, God permits Amos to see him decreeing a fire or a drought to consume the land of northern Israel. Amos responded again and cried out to the Lord, in Amos 7:5:

**Sovereign Lord, [forgive]! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!
(Amos 7:5).**

Once again, in verse 6, God relented.

Then a third vision is reported in Amos 7:7-9. This time, Amos saw God standing beside a wall with a plumb line in his hand. He was measuring the wall to see if it was crooked and if it needed to be torn down. Now, this plumb symbolized the fact that God was going to judge each individual among his people and destroy only those who had rebelled against him. Amos had nothing to say about this vision. He knew that a righteous remnant would be found and would survive.

The prophetic books are full of vision reports like these. You will remember the first chapter of Ezekiel where we see the great chariot throne of God. And you will also remember the many visions of Daniel the prophet. The prophetic vision reports let us know the heavenly origins of the prophetic word.

Historical Backgrounds

Now in addition to prophetic calls and symbolic actions and vision reports, a number of historical accounts in the prophets simply provide us with historical backgrounds. These kinds of narratives appear scattered here and there throughout the prophets. One very important example of a focus on historical background appears in Isaiah 7–8. These chapters provide the historical context in which the well-known prediction of Isaiah 7:14 appears. In Isaiah 7:14 we read these words:

The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14).

Now, often Christians mistakenly pay very little attention to the narrative that surrounds this verse, the narrative of chapters 7–8 in Isaiah. These chapters provide an historical context for Isaiah's prophetic word.

In Isaiah 7:1-2, we learn that Isaiah was approaching Ahaz at this time when he was terrified by the threats of Syria and northern Israel. These nations wanted King Ahaz to join their coalition against the empire of Assyria. So, in 7:3-11, the narrative tells us that Isaiah delivered a warning to Ahaz. He warned him not to fear any of these nations, but to trust Yahweh for his deliverance. But in 7:12 we learn that Ahaz refused to trust God. So, in 7:13–8:18 the narrative explains how Isaiah rebuked Ahaz and announced that God was going to judge Judah through the Assyrian empire. This historical narrative was designed to provide a context, an historical background for Isaiah's prophecies in this passage. We can only hope to understand Isaiah's predictions correctly when we set his predictions within the context of this historical narrative.

Whenever we read Old Testament prophecy and we come upon a story, we have to ask ourselves these questions: Are we dealing with a call narrative? Are we dealing with a report of a symbolic action? Or are we dealing with a vision report or simply a narrative that gives us historical background to a prophecy? As we ask these kinds of questions, we'll find ourselves able to understand passages that otherwise remain hidden from us.

So far in our lesson of prophetic literature, we have seen that the prophets included historical narratives in their books. Now we should turn to a second major type of material found in this part of the Bible — the prophets' communication with God.

COMMUNICATION WITH GOD

Old Testament prophets were men and women who loved God, and so their lives were full of prayer. But we also have to remember that they loved their Bibles and they learned how to pray from their Bibles. And so we discover that the prophets of the Old Testament prayed to God in the ways that the Psalms prayed to the Lord. The full range of every imaginable kind of prayer can be found within the prophetic books.

For the sake of simplicity, we'll point to two ends of the spectrum of prayers which we find in the prophets. We'll speak first of prayers of lament, and then second, prayers of praise. When the prophets spoke to God, they opened their hearts to him across the full range of sorrow and joy. Let's look first at how the prophets expressed themselves to God in prayers of lament.

PRAYERS OF LAMENT

Unfortunately, many Christians today are unfamiliar with that type of prayer that we call laments. Laments are those prayers that offer disappointment and sadness and confusion to the Lord. In our day, many Christians think that it is inappropriate to pray that way, but we discover that the prophets of the Old Testament tell us that those kinds of prayers are a very important part of our lives with the Lord. The prophets offered their confusion, their disappointment, and their sadness to God in prayer. Laments appear throughout the prophets. Jeremiah, Lamentations, and Habakkuk are especially well

known for their extensive laments, but these kinds of prayers appear in many prophetic books. In fact, the book of Haggai is the only prophetic book that does not contain a passage that's at least closely related to laments. The frequency of prayers of lament within the prophetic books indicates that this was a very central part of the prophetic ministry.

The prophets offered their concerns to the Lord through laments because they faced some of the worst times in the history of God's people. To explore how laments appear in the Old Testament prophetic books, it helps to realize that prophets usually lamented about two different topics: first, the sins of God's people; and second, the judgment of God against sin. One of the best ways to illustrate these two concerns of prophetic laments is to look at the laments contained in the book of Habakkuk. Habakkuk ministered just before and during the Babylonian crisis in Judah, and for this reason, Habakkuk talked to God about two big problems. On the one hand, in 1:2-4, he lamented about the sins of Israel and the way that Israel had rebelled against God. And then in chapter 1, he lamented over the horrors of God's judgment in the aggression of the Babylonians. We should begin by looking at the prophet's laments over the sins of God's people.

Sins of People

In the opening verse of his book, Habakkuk reflected on the sins of God's people and cried out to God. In Habakkuk 1:2, we read these words:

How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry to you, "Violence!" but you do not save? (Habakkuk 1:2)

Habakkuk was deeply distressed over the fact that God had not heard his prayers about the moral condition of Judah. Like many other prophets, he was especially concerned with rampant injustices in the land. And so we read in 1:4:

The law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted (Habakkuk 1:4).

Habakkuk was distressed that God had not reacted in judgment against the sins of his people. He felt frustrated and helpless. This opening prayer in Habakkuk illustrates one of the central ways in which prophets expressed their hearts to the Lord. When they saw the pain and suffering of God's people, they could do nothing but cry out to God themselves and call others to cry out in laments.

As we have seen, Habakkuk cried out to God to punish the people of Judah for their sins. And when we read through the book of Habakkuk, we find that in 1:5-11, God responded to Habakkuk's prayer by saying that he would soon punish the wicked of Judah. As we read in 1:6:

I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own (Habakkuk 1:6).

God promised that he would answer the prophet's cry for judgment against those who practiced injustice in Judah. Now, God was true to his response to Habakkuk, and he sent the Babylonians in covenant judgment, and they subjugated Judah and mistreated the people of God.

Judgment

Once God acted in judgment, however, Habakkuk looked at the situation again and raised a second major kind of lament that we find in the prophets—laments over God's judgment. Listen to the way he prays about Judah's suffering under the Babylonians. In 1:13 Habakkuk says these words:

**Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong.
Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while
the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?
(Habakkuk 1:13)**

The prophet knew that God's people had sinned terribly, but now he realized that the sins of the Babylonians were even greater. The pain and suffering under foreign oppressors compelled Habakkuk to cry out to God with deep lament. And in response to Habakkuk's cry, God told the prophet in 2:2-20, that he would one day punish the Babylonians for their oppression. For instance, in 2:8 we read these words to the Babylonians:

**Because you have plundered many nations, the people who are left
will plunder you (Habakkuk 2:8).**

Habakkuk's lament over the severity of God's judgment reached the throne of heaven, and God assured him that Babylon would be destroyed.

Throughout the prophets, we find that these servants of the Lord offered prayers of lament to bear their burdens before the Lord. We find occasionally that they offer laments on the behalf of Gentile nations to ensure the people of Israel that their enemies would be destroyed. But usually, they offered these burdens to the Lord to let the people know how severe their sins were and to call them to repentance.

Laments are one of the ways in which prophets communicated with God. Now we should turn to the second major type of prayer appearing in the prophets — the praise of God.

PRAYERS OF PRAISE

Just as the Psalms have many examples of praise to God within them, the prophets also used this form of expression to speak words to the Lord. Usually they offered praise to God because of his great covenant blessings. When the prophets would

see what good things God was going to do, they would come to him with praise. The praise of God occurs in many prophetic books. It was a very important theme to the prophets. We're going to complete our look at the book of Habakkuk by noting the praise of God that appears at the end of his book.

As we've already seen, most of the book of Habakkuk deals primarily with the prophet's laments and God's responses to his laments. But the last chapter of the book shifts from lament to praise. After God had promised that he would destroy the Babylonians for their severe treatment of God's people, Habakkuk offers a wonderful praise to the Lord. What kind of praise do we find in Habakkuk? Throughout the prophets, two themes take center stage in the praise of God. When the prophets honor the Lord with praise, they praise him for his judgments and for his blessings. When we look at the third chapter of Habakkuk, we'll see that he also followed this pattern as well.

Judgment

In Habakkuk 3:11-12, the prophet says these words:

Sun and moon stood still in the heavens at the glint of your flying arrows, at the lightening of your flashing spear. In wrath you strode through the earth and in anger you threshed the nations. (Habakkuk 3:11-12)

We see here that the prophet honored God with praise for his ability to strike the nations and to destroy them in judgment.

This theme of praise for judgment appears in many places in the prophets. For example, the prophet Isaiah praises the Lord in 40:22-23 in this way:

[God] sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in. He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing (Isaiah 40:22-23).

When we come to passages that praise God for his judgment, we often feel very strange. Christians today think that you should only praise the Lord for his blessings in the earth, but the reality is this — the world persecutes the people of God. And as a result, when God judges those who persecute his people, the people of God should praise him. The prophets understood this and so they praised the Lord for his judgments.

Blessings

This interconnection between judgment and blessing brings us to the second focus of prophetic praise. The prophets often praised the Lord not only for his judgment, but also for the many blessings that he gives to his people. For example, the prophet

Habakkuk stated explicitly why he praised God for his power in judgment. In Habakkuk 3:12-13, we read these words:

In wrath you strode through the earth and in anger you threshed the nations. You came out to deliver your people, to save your anointed one (Habakkuk 3:12-13).

Habakkuk saw that one day God would judge the wicked and so deliver the nation of Israel and restore the house of David. Habakkuk saw these things and he praised his God for his judgments.

In much the same way, the prophet Isaiah also honors God by quoting God's own words of praise to himself. In Isaiah 44:24 these words appear:

This is what the Lord says — your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb: I am the Lord, who has made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself (Isaiah 44:24).

Then in 44:26 the prophet continues:

[I am the Lord] ... who says of Jerusalem, "It shall be inhabited," of the towns of Judah, "They shall be built," and of their ruins, "I will restore them" (Isaiah 44:26).

The prophets not only offered prayers of sadness and lament, but great, ecstatic praise to God. And when the original readers would read these words, they were moved to praise God as well. When we hear the prophets speaking words of praise to the Lord for his blessings and his judgments, we should join them in the praise of God.

So far in this lesson, we've seen that the prophetic books contain historical narratives and the prophets' communication with God. Now we come to the third major category of literature that we find in Old Testament prophets — communication with people.

COMMUNICATION WITH PEOPLE

As important as it is to know that the prophets had historical accounts and prayers within their materials, these genres don't deal with the main purpose for which God called prophets. God called his prophets to be his emissaries, to speak to kings and to the people of the visible covenant community, and as a result, the vast majority of their word is actually messages from God to the people. And so now we must turn to this kind of genre within the prophetic material. We'll divide our examination of the prophets' communication with people into three parts: speeches of judgment; speeches of blessing; and speeches that were mixed or in-between these two extremes. Let's look first at some

of the ways Old Testament prophets announced the words of judgment to the people of the covenant.

SPEECHES OF JUDGMENT

In recent decades, research into the prophetic books and comparisons with the literature of other cultures has made it clear that Old Testament prophets usually delivered their speeches to people in typical forms or patterns. These patterns of speech were flexible and could be adapted to different situations by different people, but three major types of speech were used to announce covenant judgment — judgment oracles, woe oracles, and lawsuits. Let's look first at judgment oracles.

Judgment Oracles

Judgment oracles are the simplest type of speech that appears in the books of Old Testament prophecy. A typical oracle of judgment has two major components: first, there is an accusation in which the prophet calls attention to the sins of God's people; second, there is a sentencing, and in this sentencing the prophet announces what kind of covenant curse the people will experience because of their sins. Sometimes, these two components are reversed in order, or the prophet alternates between one and then the other. On some occasions, an oracle of judgment may be abbreviated so that it contains only an accusation or a sentencing. But more often than not, this basic two-fold pattern of accusation and sentencing is followed by the prophets.

For instance, the prophet Amos delivered an oracle of judgment against Samaria in Amos 4:1-3. He began with an accusation against the rich, gluttonous women of Samaria. In 4:1 we read these words:

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, "Bring us some drinks!" (Amos 4:1).

We see here that Amos accuses the women of Samaria of harming the poor of northern Israel. Instead of meeting the needs of the poor, they simply called upon their husbands to satisfy their gluttonous appetites.

In a fashion common to judgment oracles, Amos 4:2-3 moves next to announce God's sentencing against those who have broken this covenant responsibility. Listen to what Amos 4:2-3 says:

The Sovereign Lord has sworn by his holiness: "The time will surely come when you will be taken away with hooks, the last of you with fishhooks. You will each go straight out through breaks in the wall, and you will be cast out towards Harmon," declares the Lord (Amos 4:2-3).

In a word, Amos predicted that Samaria would be destroyed, and these rich women would be taken away into exile.

Woe Oracles

In addition to oracles of judgment, Old Testament prophets often announced covenant curses in a pattern known as oracles of woe. Oracles of woe are very similar to judgment oracles in that they usually have an accusation followed by a sentencing. The major distinction that these oracles have is that they are introduced by an expression of woe at the very beginning.

One example of an oracle of woe appears in Isaiah 5:8-10. There the prophet announces that the people had disenfranchised the poor by buying all the land they could. The expression of woe occurs in Isaiah 5:8: “Woe to you,” Isaiah says. What Isaiah is about to say will not be a welcome word of blessing, but a curse from God. The accusation of his oracle follows the expression of woe in 5:8:

You who add house to house and join field to field until no space is left and you live alone in the land (Isaiah 5:8).

We must always remember that in the days of Moses, God established that each family would have the security of a permanent inheritance. In Isaiah’s day, however, the rich Judaites had violated this covenant sanction by purchasing every piece of property they could. So in Isaiah 5:9-10, the prophet declares a sentencing against these covenant violators:

The Lord Almighty has declared in my hearing: “Surely the great houses will become desolate, the fine mansions [will be] left without occupants. A ten-acre vineyard will produce only a bath of wine, a homer of seed only an ephah of grain” (Isaiah 5:9-10).

We see here that, as in many prophecies, the punishment fits the crime. The rich had sought to secure their financial advantage by collecting property, but God was going to make sure that their efforts would be in vain. Woe oracles like this one appear throughout the prophets.

Lawsuits

In addition to judgment and woe oracles, the prophets also pronounced covenant curses in the form of lawsuits. The Hebrew word *rib* (רִיב) is often associated with this form of speech. Normally, the term *rib* means “to contend” or “to strive,” but it took a special significance in the prophets. It indicates a legal striving. It’s a technical term for a

legal proceeding or a lawsuit which took place in the heavenly court of Yahweh, the Great King.

We've already seen that the prophets often had visions of heaven, the heavenly throne room of God. And many times the throne room of God was seen as a courtroom, and as a result, legal terminology comes forth. God is seen as both the prosecutor and the judge. The witnesses are called against the people of God, and the people are the defendants who have been charged by God. Now, usually we don't find a full-fledged lawsuit within the prophets, but many times we find what may be called modified lawsuits. A *rib*, or a lawsuit, may contain many elements. First, just as we would expect in a court scene, there is a summons to court. Witnesses are identified. Then God reviews how kind he has been to the accused, and some kind of response is often given, sometimes by the prophet himself. And then God's accusation follows along with a sentencing.

One of the best examples of a full lawsuit appears in Micah 6:1-16. We hear the summons to court in verse 1. Listen to what the Lord says:

Stand up, plead your case before the mountains; let the hills hear what you have to say (Micah 6:1).

Then in verse 2, the witnesses themselves are addressed:

Hear, O mountains, the Lord's accusation; listen, you everlasting foundations of the earth (Micah 6:2).

Following this address to the witnesses, God reminds the court of his kindness to his people. In verse 3, we read these words:

My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Answer me (Micah 6:3).

Then Micah the prophet speaks on behalf of the people, responding to God's question in humility in verses 6 through 8. He says in verse 6:

With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? (Micah 6:6).

Then, admitting the guilt of the nation, Micah concludes this in verse 8:

He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8).

Following the prophet's response, we find accusations in verses 10-12, and the sentencing in verses 13-16. Lawsuits, similar to this passage, appear in the prophets as one of the ways God accuses them and then threatens his people with judgment.

SPEECHES OF BLESSING

As we have seen, prophets not only announce God's judgment against his people. They also declare that God would bring blessing to his people as well. There are basically two ways in which the prophets announce divine blessings for his people: On the one hand, prophets would declare judgments against the enemies of God's people. And on the other hand, they would announce blessings directly for the people of God. First, let's see how judgment on enemies becomes a blessing to the people of God.

Judgment of Enemies

Throughout the history of Israel, foreign nations troubled God's people, and one of the ways God announced great gifts and blessings to his people was by having his prophets declare judgments on these enemies. As a result, we find oracles of judgment, woe oracles, and lawsuits throughout the prophets that are directed toward Gentile enemies. For example, in Nahum 3:1 we read these words about Nineveh:

Woe to the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims! (Nahum 3:1).

Oracles of judgment, woe, and lawsuits against Gentile nations had a two-fold purpose. They declared that God was going to destroy the enemies of Israel, but they also had the positive purpose of assuring Israel that God would deliver his people.

Oracles of Blessing

In addition to announcing judgments on enemies, the prophets also brought words of hope to Israel by declaring oracles of blessing. Announcements of blessings were very flexible in form and they vary greatly, but a basic pattern appears many times. First, some introductory address appears, and then some reason is given for the blessing to follow. Then the oracles often elaborate on what that blessing will be. For example, the prophet Jeremiah announced a blessing for the Recabites in Jeremiah 35:18-19. We find an introduction to this oracle in the first part of verse 18:

This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says... (Jeremiah 35:18)

This introductory formula is followed by the reason God is going to give a blessing to his people. In the second part of verse 18, we read these words:

You have obeyed the command of your forefather Jonadab and have followed all his instructions and have done everything he ordered (Jeremiah 35:18).

The announcement of blessing then appears in verse 19:

Jonadab son of Recab will never fail to have a man to serve me (Jeremiah 35:19).

Another well-known oracle of blessing appears in Jeremiah 31:31-34. First, God announces the blessing in verses 31-33. In Jeremiah 31:31 we read these words:

“The time is coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” (Jeremiah 31:31).

The prophet announced the blessing of a new covenant that would come when Israel is restored from exile. Then in Jeremiah 31:34 we find the reason for this blessing:

For I will forgive their wickedness and I will remember their sins no more (Jeremiah 31:34).

God’s grace in forgiveness formed the basis of the new covenant promise.

MIXED SPEECHES

So we’ve seen then that the prophets had typical speeches that covered both the blessings of God and the curses of God. But many times we find in the prophets what we might call mixed speeches. Now these mixed speeches come in many different forms and we can only touch on a few of them. But what we have to remember is that these mixed speeches had the potential both for referring to the blessings of God and the curses of God.

Judgment-Salvation Oracles

First, we may speak of judgment-salvation oracles where judgment is threatened against some and blessings are offered to others within the same speech. Isaiah 57:14-21 is a good example of a mixed speech with words of judgment for the wicked and salvation for the righteous.

Call to Repentance

In addition, many times the prophets call people to repentance warning of judgment and offering blessings to those who repent. An example of a call to repentance

can be found in Isaiah 55:6-13. There the prophet calls God's people to turn from their evil ways.

Call to War

At other times prophets will call their listeners to war. Again, these calls are mixed because they may be calls to victory or to defeat. For example, in Hosea 5:8-11 we find a call to war, to prepare to be attacked by the judgment of God.

Prophetic Disputation

Another example of mixed speeches is the prophetic disputation. Prophets entered into disputations or arguments with other prophets. For instance, in Micah 2:6-11 the prophet argued against the views of the false prophets. Disputations announce either blessing or judgment to come.

Parables

Finally, the prophets declared mixed messages in the genre of parables. Parables may be the positive announcement of God's grace or the negative announcement of his judgment. Isaiah 5:1-7 is a powerful example of a parable in the prophets. There, the prophet Isaiah likened Israel to a vineyard.

There are many kinds of mixed oracles that we find throughout the prophets, yet as we come upon them, we should always be alert to the fact that these speeches may serve either to announce covenant blessings or curses.

CONCLUSION

So it is that we have seen that the prophetic literature contains many types of speeches by the prophets. In addition to historical accounts and communication with God, the prophets spent much of their time bringing God's word to his people. It is hard to imagine that we could overemphasize becoming familiar with the various genres that appear within the prophetic books. Many times we feel lost and confused when we read the prophets because we're not aware of the different types of materials that we find there. We've seen that we find in the prophets narratives of historical accounts and communication with God, as well as communication with people. As we read the prophetic books and keep these genre designations in mind, we can go a long way for understanding what they meant in their day and what they mean for us today.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr. (Host) is Co-Founder and President of Third Millennium Ministries. He served as Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary for more than 20 years and was chair of the Old Testament department. An ordained minister, Dr. Pratt travels extensively to evangelize and teach. He studied at Westminster Theological Seminary, received his M.Div. from Union Theological Seminary, and earned his Th.D. in Old Testament Studies from Harvard University. Dr. Pratt is the general editor of the NIV Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible and a translator for the New Living Translation. He has also authored numerous articles and books, including *Pray with Your Eyes Open*, *Every Thought Captive*, *Designed for Dignity*, *He Gave Us Stories*, *Commentary on 1 & 2 Chronicles* and *Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*.

He Gave Us Prophets

LESSON
SIX

Literary Analysis of the
Prophets
Faculty Forum



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He Gave Us Prophets

Lesson Six: Literary Analysis of the Prophets

Faculty Forum

With

Dr. David Correa
Mr. Sherif Atef Fahim
Rev. Sherif Gendy
Rev. Michael J. Glodo
Dr. Douglas Gropp
Dr. Gordon H. Johnston
Dr. David T. Lamb

Dr. Robert G. Lister
Dr. Chip McDaniel
Dr. Greg Perry
Dr. Donna Petter
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.
Dr. Charles Quarles
Dr. Scott Redd

Dr. Philip Ryken
Dr. Mark Saucy
Dr. Seth Tarrer
Dr. Miles Van Pelt
Dr. Bill Ury
Dr. Federico Villanueva

Question 1:

How can identifying the different kinds of literature that appear in the prophetic books help us interpret them more responsibly?

Dr. Chip McDaniel

When we interpret the Old Testament, we have to look at the genre of the material that we're reading. In terms of today, we don't read a novel the same way we read a contract. We don't view a documentary concerning a battle in World War II in the same way that we would look at a movie on the same subject. There are certain rules of interpretation that come with different types of literature. For example, there's a difference between poetry and prose. A great deal of the Old Testament is written in poetic form, and it is characterized by a terseness; there is an absence of words that they would gap or leave out. And there's also an extended use of figures of speech. So, we have to come to the material sensitive to this, or we will misread it because, perhaps, we're not understanding a figure, or we're not understanding that sometimes words are left out, and it can be important by that omission as well.

Another example would be with regard to prophecy. There are several factors we need to keep in mind with regard to prophecy. For example, some prophecies, not all, have an element of contingency baked into them. And so, for example, in Jeremiah 18 and in Ezekiel 18, God will say, "If I say I'm going to punish someone because of their sins, and then they repent, well, I won't do it. I'll set that aside. Or if I say I'm going to bless them, and then they start sinning, then I'm not going to bless them." There's a contingency based upon the reaction of the people that received the word of God. An example of this would be in the book of Jonah. Some people would look at the book of Jonah and say, a prophet is supposed to be right all of the time. Jonah went into Nineveh and said, "Forty days and you're toast. You're going to be destroyed." Forty days later they weren't destroyed, so Jonah got it wrong. Well, no, Jonah is a prophet, and in that prophecy there is the notion that if they repent God isn't going to destroy them. And, in fact, we know that that's the case. They repented, and God didn't destroy them. But Jonah also gives us the idea that he understands that

that's true because he says, as he's sulking to the east of the city, he's saying, "I just knew. Didn't I say, when I was back in my home country, didn't I just say that you're the type of God that forgives? Didn't I call this in advance?" And so, there's baked into even the message of Jonah this idea of contingency. So when we come to the Old Testament, we have to be sensitive to the type of literature, particularly as we deal with poetry and with respect to prophecy.

Rev. Sherif Gendy, translation

Identifying the genre is extremely helpful to us in interpreting the Prophets. There's an important verse in the book of Exodus 33:11 that says, "The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend." Another important reference is in Numbers 12:6-8, which says that the Lord spoke to Moses "mouth to mouth," but to the prophets God spoke in visions, dreams, and riddles. These two references help us understand that Moses' writings contain direct revelations from God that do not include riddles, visions, or dreams. They do not have rhetorical devices like imagery, symbols, or metaphors as we would expect to find in prophetic books. In the Prophets, God more frequently speaks through dreams, visions, and riddles. The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews also says that God spoke by the prophets in many ways. So, when we come to the writings of the prophets, we would expect and anticipate finding rhetorical devices like imagery, metaphors, and symbols, because of the nature of divine revelation through the prophets, which involves, as I said, dreams, riddles, and visions... Let me give an example, or some examples, for this. In Ezekiel 17, Ezekiel speaks a parable or a story of the two eagles and the vine. This is an example of a riddle or allegory through which the Lord speaks to the people. We also see symbolic actions that the prophets performed to send a message to the people. For example, in Isaiah 20, the Lord asked Isaiah to walk naked and barefoot for three years. The Lord asked Jeremiah, in Jeremiah 27 and 28, to put a yoke on his neck as a symbol of putting the people under the yoke of the exile. In Ezekiel 4, the Lord asked Ezekiel to lie on his left side for 390 days and on his right side for 40 days. Such symbolic actions, proverbs, and stories, which are found in the Prophets, help us understand the genre. We can anticipate finding more symbols and poetry in the Prophets. So identifying the genre helps us understand the best approach to interpret prophetic texts.

Dr. Federico Villanueva

It is very important for us to remember when reading the Bible that the Bible has been written in different kinds of genre, or literature. There are poems or psalms. There are many narratives. There are also parables and other different kinds of literature. It's important for us to remember this because the type of genre of the Bible also shows us in some way the intention of the author. Like, for instance, by using poetry, the author is trying to convey his own purpose to read it not only with our mind, not only to read it literally, but with our emotions, and so on. One of the problems with some Christians reading the Bible is that they read the Bible as if it only consists of one genre: it's all history. So, they like to read everything like historical and so on. And so they run into problems when they read some text of the Bible and then try to read it like historical material... For example, Revelation, if you read it literally, then you

run into all kinds of problems like discovering who the 666 is there, the Antichrist, the end of the world, and so on and so forth, when in fact, the book of Revelation is an — they call it apocalyptic literature, which is full of imagery, not literally, but it's a particular kind of genre which conveys truth by using imagery. So, it will really help us to solve some of the problems or to avoid some of the problems if we consider the particular genre of a particular text.

Question 2:

Why did prophets write some of their prophecies as historical narratives?

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

A lot of what we read in prophetic books is in the form of a narrative, in the form of stories. And in many respects, the reasons why prophets included stories or narratives within their books is the same reason any biblical writer includes narratives. I mean, there are all kinds of reasons for this, but they're similar throughout the Old Testament and even into the New Testament. Why are there stories? Well, one of the main reasons is to tell you what happened. And because we believe that these stories are inspired by Holy Spirit, we know that he doesn't lie to us about what happened. So when we read about things that happen in Hosea's life or Isaiah's life, or whatever prophet it may be, we know that those things actually happened. So they are historical records. Another reason why biblical writers write narratives is to teach lessons from those stories to their people, the people who are reading them, because stories have a way of incarnating the principles of our faith, to fleshing them out, to putting them out there in ways that reveal real flesh and bone and how these things worked out in the lives of individual people and groups of people. And it helps us understand that our faith is not just a series of abstract principles but actually is something that happens in concrete history, even as my own experience of Christ is today and everyone else's is. It actually happens in real life. And that's another reason why biblical writers give stories, including prophets.

But the unusual thing about prophecy and the narratives that we have in the biblical books of prophets is that they actually give us insights into the prophetic predictions that prophets make. They provide a context. They tell us that prophets were true, so they show their moral character and the way they lived, to see they're true prophets, they're faithful to God. That's like the first chapters of the book of Daniel. Those characters in his book, they did practically nothing wrong. You'd be hard pressed to find anything they do wrong in the first few chapters of Daniel because it's letting the people know, now this book you're reading about from the man Daniel, he was quite a man, he was quite devoted to God. But also within biblical narratives of prophets you find embedded within them prophetic words that were given, prophecies that they actually gave. And the narrative itself gives the context. It helps you understand why the prophet said the things that he said, and then it allows you to understand what those predictions meant and how they were fulfilled and those sorts of things. So, in

many respects, the narratives that we find in Prophets are just like other narratives in the Bible, but they have these unique qualities that support the prophetic word by means of story.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

When you start to become aware of the prophets' larger ministry, you realize a lot of what the prophets are doing happens in the context of historical narratives. And an important principle comes out of that observation. Geerhardus Vos said that history is the field of revelation. That is, God doesn't reveal himself in an abstract philosophical system, but he reveals it in the grit and the grime and the actual events of history, because that's where redemption is taking place. And so, God is responding to the lives of his people in history, because the Bible is a story of redemptive history, and so the prophets are acting within the real life situations of the people of God. Now, you also see the prophets' ministries coming forward in Scripture through biography and autobiography, and there are probably a couple of reasons that we can say that that's the case. First of all, Moses ... in Deuteronomy 18, says that God will raise up a prophet like him from among their brothers. And so, there are certain criteria for what a true prophet would be. So, when we read the biographical aspects of the prophets' ministries, whether self-reported or whether reported through the eyes of others, we see their qualifications coming forward. You know, all the great prophets, and by that I mean the major prophets, have these calling scenes where the prophets are called into the heavenly courts through some kind of vision or something similar, like Isaiah 6. They are confronted with the divine glory, and they are commissioned with a message to deliver to God's people. Oftentimes you'll see the prophets view themselves as unworthy and themselves in need of cleansing, such as Isaiah says, "I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell among a people of unclean lips." So, the prophets were from among their countrymen, that is, they were part of the people of God, and yet those biographical and autobiographical sections also tell us the way in which they become qualified to carry out their ministry as prophets.

Rev. Sherif Gendy, translation

Many parts of the Prophets were written as historical narratives, in particular as biographies and autobiographies of the prophets themselves. This is because there can't be a separation between the ministry and the personal life of the prophet in the Old Testament. The Lord raised up the prophet among the people to be a pattern and type of the people's lives, and his personal life was a message to the people. As we see, for example, in Hosea, where the Lord commanded the prophet to marry "a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom," to embody, through the personal life of the prophet, the message the Lord wanted to deliver to his people. So, we can't split the personal life of the prophet and his circumstances, such as his marriage, from the message the Lord wanted to deliver to the people. The prophet, through his life and words, was the message to the people. In addition, the benevolence the Lord showed to the prophet displayed the type of blessings God offered to his people. So, the way the Lord dealt with the prophet illustrated before the people what the Lord was doing with them. The life of the prophet and the way God worked in his life was a figurative image of the way God was dealing with his people.

Question 3:

Why did prophets sometimes use symbolic actions in their prophecies?

Dr. Douglas Gropp

We think of the prophets as proclaiming divine words, divine words of judgment and divine words of salvation, but the prophetic books often include quite a bit of biographical and autobiographical material, and a lot of that is introduced, a lot of that has to do with the prophets' lives themselves, because their very lives, as well as their words, serve as signs, as part of their message. They embody the message that they're sent to convey to Israel from the Lord. The prophets were often like street-theater performers in performing their signs in symbolic gestures. It was in the context of words, sometimes without words, maybe to be even disconcerting to their audience at times. Parables and symbolic gestures of the prophets could be seen almost as two different sides of the coin. Parables could be seen as extended similes or metaphors. They're very much like symbolic gestures, but in words rather than in bodily movements.

Rev. Sherif Gendy, translation

Prophets sometimes used symbolic actions in their prophecies to illustrate the Lord's message to the people in a visual and clear way, without any ambiguity. One of the prophets who used many symbolic actions in the Old Testament is Ezekiel. Let me give some quick examples. For example, in Ezekiel 5:1-4, the Lord commanded Ezekiel to shave his head and beard, to weigh the hair, and to burn part of it in the fire as a sign of the coming destruction and devastation of Jerusalem. In Ezekiel 12:1-7, the Lord commanded Ezekiel to prepare baggage, and to go out in the sight of the people, to walk in front of them while carrying his baggage. This was a sign to tell them to be prepared for the coming exile, to say that, "All of us are going into exile." In the same chapter, in verse 6, the Lord said to the prophet, "I have made you a sign for the people." So, through this behavior, he is a clear picture, a sign, and a visual illustration of what the Lord wants to say to the people. Another example is in 24:15-27. Here, the Lord told Ezekiel that he would take away from him the delight of his eyes, his wife. He commanded him not to mourn or weep over his wife! The people were astonished and asked him in verse 19,

Will you not tell us what these things mean for us? (Ezekiel 24:19).

It says twice in the same chapter, in verse 24,

Thus shall Ezekiel be to you a sign (Ezekiel 24:24).

And verse 27,

You will be a sign to them (Ezekiel 24:27).

So, the symbolic actions that took place in the lives of the prophets were one of the means the Lord used to send his message in the clearest possible way to the people, hoping that the people might repent and return to the Lord.

Dr. Seth Tarrer

The symbolic acts of prophets are fascinating to behold in Scripture, but they don't just start in Scripture. This is a prophetic practice, or a divinatory practice wellattested in the ancient Near East all the way into the second millennium. We have letters and clay tablets, inscriptions from Mari, the Mari empire, from the late eighteenth century, in which we read about prophets performing these symbolic acts in the name of their particular god. One particular mention is a prophet devours a lamb raw in front of a group of elders gathered together in the city, and this is reported. The letter is sent to the king of the Mari Empire at the time, Zimri-Lim, and it's recorded for us in some clay tablets. So the prophets have been doing this, or people who call themselves prophets have been doing this in the name of their god or goddess for millennia... However, when we turn to the symbolic actions of the prophets in the Old Testament, they're functioning in a different way ... and the order is that the prophets are enacting these symbolic acts in order to arouse the emotions of the hearers and the observers and the readers of the texts to either fear or hope. We see Isaiah do this when he's told in Isaiah 20:1-6, he's told to walk around naked for three years, and he does. It's a good example, Isaiah, because when you compare Isaiah with the text from Mari that I mentioned a moment ago, with the prophet of Dagan devouring the lamb, we're never told why he devours the lamb; however, explicitly in the text of Isaiah 20:1-6 we're told why Isaiah is told to walk around naked. He's told to walk about naked because were Israel to put their faith in an Egyptian alliance, that would be foolish, and they themselves would be led off naked like captives were often led off after they were defeated in the ancient world. Ezekiel, of all the prophets, is perhaps most famous for some of the most bizarre symbolic actions that we read of in Scripture. Ezekiel is told to lay on his left side for 390 days, representing the 390 years since Solomon's temple was built till the time of his exile there in Babylon. He's told to then turn over and lay on his right side for 40 more days, all the while he's only eating barley cakes that he's allowed to cook over manure. He shaves his head and his beard, and he takes his hair and divides it into three portions. A portion of it he burns with fire, a portion of it he strikes with his sword, and a portion of it he lets go to the wind. Why? These are symbolic acts. They represent the reality that Israel is going to face. And according to Ezekiel's own explanation of this, a third of the Israelites in exile will be burned by fire, a third will perish by the sword, and a third will be scattered unto the winds, which we know occurs.

And so, a big difference we then see in Israel's prophets' symbolic actions and those of the ancient world were that there was no magic involved... The Israelite prophets' symbolic acts were done to illustrate what the word of God had declared would take place. The Israelite prophets, then, as performing these symbolic acts, their bodies became texts, texts to distribute the message of the word of God. They were called to be messengers by any means necessary: persuade, arouse, effect change in the hearers. And the symbolic acts were powerfully evocative ways to do this. Now, interestingly, literarily we read about these. We're not witnesses to them personally. We read about these acts. So, as listeners of the text, as readers of the text, what do they do for us? Well, they do some very important things. First of all, they help us

locate the prophets in time and space. We read about Jeremiah's interaction with the prophet Hananiah and the breaking of the wooden yoke and the replacing with the iron yoke. And that gives us a window into the reality of the person Jeremiah and the person Hananiah... So literarily, the symbolic acts of the prophets, they give us a window into the lived lives of the prophets themselves. They're also probably incorporated into the prophetic texts that we have today in our Old Testament as illustrations of prophetic conflict, illustrations that would hopefully inform and educate and serve as models and examples for the reading communities of later generations.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

You don't get very far in the reading of prophets until you see them undertaking some very ... bizarre actions, but we'll call them dramatic actions. And someone might ask the question, why do the prophets use such dramatic ways of acting? Jeremiah particularly comes to mind with some "crazy stunts," we might say. You have to first appreciate that the prophets are often coming in the context, most often coming in the context, where God's people are resistant, they're hard-hearted. There have been long periods of not listening to the prophets, and so God "shouts," as it were, through these dramatic actions and sometimes through bizarre visions. And so they take on a dramatic shape because it's God's way, if you will, of getting their attention — sort of the reason we use metaphors because sometimes straightforward propositions just don't penetrate. Underlying these dramatic actions are also something that is worth understanding when we are in the Prophets, and that is what some have called the "curse function" of Scripture, that as Isaiah — and Jesus refers to this in the parable of the sower — Isaiah said, "hearing, they may not understand, seeing they may not perceive," that when God's people are so hard-hearted, they're refusing to listen to reason, if you will and God engages in dramatic actions and even veiled parables to further their guilt because the word of God, in whatever form it comes in, must be responded to in faith and in repentance. But for those who are hard-hearted and rebellious, the word of God actually makes them more dull and more senseless... This is what we see in the parables, particularly the parables of the sower, those who had eyes to see and ears to hear understood, but for those who were not receptive, they were actually blinded by these dramatic actions and other forms of prophetic revelation.

Question 4:

How does understanding the historical context help us interpret Isaiah 7?

Rev. Sherif Gendy, translation

Understanding the historical context of Isaiah 7 and 8 helps us to interpret the text correctly in several ways. The historical context shows that, at that time, Rezin, the king of Syria, and Pekah, the son of Remaliah, the king of Israel, made a coalition and came to wage war against Judah. At that time Ahaz was the king of Judah. Ahaz was afraid and confused. The reason for this war was that Judah refused to join Syria and

Israel in their coalition against Assyria. The Lord comforted Ahaz through the prophet Isaiah and told him not to be afraid of these two kings — Rezin and Pekah — not to fear Syria and Israel. The Lord told him to ask for a sign. Yet, Ahaz refused to ask for a sign. So, the Lord gave him the sign of Immanuel and informed him directly in 7:16,

**For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good,
the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted (Isaiah 7:16).**

There is a reference here that Assyria is coming and will lay waste to the land and its two kings, Rezin and Pekah; this is in chapter 7. In chapter 8, the picture gets clearer that the sign the Lord gave to king Ahaz — the sign of Immanuel — was fulfilled in chapter 8 in the birth of Maher-shalal-hash-baz. In 8:4 we read:

**For before the boy knows how to cry “My father” or “My mother,”
the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be carried away
before the king of Assyria (Isaiah 8:4).**

Once again, we see that this sign was fulfilled. And the Lord assured Ahaz not to be afraid of Israel and Syria because both would be exiled through the strong Assyrian empire. The Lord was saying to him, “Do not worry! Trust! The Lord is your helper and sustainer.” This is the historical context, which is very important to understand in order to know the details of Isaiah 7 and 8.

Dr. David Correa, translation

Normally, modern interpreters of the biblical prophetic books tend to approach the interpretation of these books in an ahistorical manner, which is to say that they don’t pay attention to the historical context of the prophecy. For example, in the well known prophecy of Isaiah 7:14, with respect to the idea that “the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,” well, modern interpreters have taken these words and removed them from their historical context, as if Isaiah pronounced this prophecy with no relationship to his own time period or context, as if this prophecy had been floating around in the air until it suddenly landed on Jesus Christ hundreds of years later. By ignoring the historical context, a person can make many errors that can lead to incorrect applications of the prophetic books... With respect to the prophecy of Isaiah about the virgin who would conceive a son, Isaiah wasn’t speaking initially of the virgin Mary. He was talking about a maiden in his own time who would give birth to a son. The child would be born as a prophetic sign to announce to God’s people that God would be with them as their Immanuel. But because the king didn’t want to trust in him, then the Lord said, “I would have been with you all, but you didn’t want that.” So, that child was born in Isaiah’s time as a sign for the king of Judah.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

One of the most important interpretive principles that we have to remember when we go to interpret the prophets is to understand that we must interpret them in their historical context first. And Isaiah 7 and 8 give perhaps the best example of this. Now, in Isaiah 7:14 you have the well-known prophecy, “The virgin,” or the young

woman — the Hebrew word can mean either there — “The virgin shall be with child”... that obviously is picked up by Matthew in Matthew 2 to be mentioned as a prophecy that’s fulfilled in Christ because Mary, the virgin, conceives by the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ. But what is easily overlooked is that Isaiah 7 is followed by Isaiah 8, and in Isaiah 8 we find that the prophet’s wife, the prophetess as she’s called there, has a son. And so, Old Testament Israel, hearing Isaiah’s prophecies would naturally have thought that the son of Isaiah was the fulfillment of what God predicted in Isaiah 7. And, in fact it is, in the original meaning to the original audience, there’s obviously a connection. So, this teaches us a really important principle, that in the Old Testament prophets, almost always, there’s some kind of near-term fulfillment, or at least a fulfillment in relation to the context of that Old Testament audience, that has its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ, in this instance. But it tells us that the Old Testament people of God didn’t simply scratch their heads and store away these prophecies saying, “You know, some day somebody’s going to need this,” but they actually were receiving words of hope, words of exhortation, words of correction in their circumstances. So, near-term fulfillments teach us that oftentimes Old Testament prophecies have progressive or iterative or multiple fulfillments until they achieve their ultimate climactic, full and final fulfillment in Jesus and the inauguration of the kingdom of God in the new covenant.

Mr. Sherif Atef Fahim, translation

Sometimes modern interpreters read prophetic texts ahistorically, or in isolation from their historical context. For example, in Isaiah 7, there is a very famous prophecy, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son.” As soon as those interpreters read this text, they do not think of anything except the birth of Jesus Christ from the virgin Mary. This is a true fulfillment of this prophecy, and Matthew testified that this is a true fulfillment of the prophecy. Yet, they jump too quickly to the final fulfillment of the prophecy. The true understanding of the prophecy has to start *first* with the historical understanding of the prophecy when Isaiah wrote it and what his purpose was... Isaiah wrote this text during certain circumstances within a certain context. He recognized a certain purpose at that time, and the people of Israel and King Ahaz understood it at that time. We have to start with this understanding, before jumping to the final fulfillment of the prophecy.

Question 5:

What is the value of prophetic laments?

Dr. Seth Tarrer

When we look at the prophetic literature and think about a lament, one of the clearest ways to formulate what exactly a prophetic lament is, is to think of it in terms of another way of expressing the moment of the irrevocable judgment of God as expressed by the prophet. These occur throughout Scripture, most notably in Amos and Jeremiah. Jeremiah, however, of all the prophets, develops a theme of the prophetic lament to an extent unseen anywhere else in the prophetic literature of the

Old Testament. In the book of Jeremiah, we see Jeremiah lamenting over Israel itself. And in the words of Jeremiah we also hear the Lord lamenting over Israel. And we also hear Jeremiah the prophet, the person, lamenting over his particular circumstance and situation in the text... These texts are clustered, primarily between chapter 11 through chapter 20, throughout. And when we look at Jeremiah's use of this lament, what we see are several things. Jeremiah has undergone particularly trying circumstances. Jeremiah's mood is one of desperation and angst at what the Lord has allowed to occur to his people in Judah under the Babylonian captivity... A major component of the prophetic lament is the way in which we, the reader of the text, are allowed a window into the humanity of the prophet. And this is important, particularly, as we think in terms of the interpretive community, the community of readers who would later take the inscripturated words of Jeremiah himself and re-appropriate them in different contexts subsequent generations on. And what we then end up doing as a reading community of these texts, particularly of prophetic laments, Jeremiah's "I" — the personal pronoun "I" — becomes understood in the terms of "we." It also recalibrates the idea and the notion of suffering, particularly in Israel's context historically. No longer is suffering thought of purely in punitive terms; rather, it's understood to be a part of life. This is the way things go. Life involves suffering and pain. It doesn't entail the absence of God; rather, one can then, through the example the prophet sets, particularly in Jeremiah, one can understand God being present amidst suffering.

Dr. Philip Ryken

One of the joys of reading and studying the Bible is coming to a deeper knowledge of the men who wrote the Bible. And often this has a way of illuminating the Scriptures, giving us a deeper understanding. There are all kinds of examples of this. I think, for example, of the ministry of Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, and understanding what he went through as he prophesied judgment against the people of God in Jerusalem, and then actually experienced God's judgment falling on that city, and then lamented the disaster that had befallen the city. All of that gives a deeper, richer understanding of the whole book of Jeremiah.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

Within the prophets as a broad genre, you have smaller genres, micro genres, or mini genres, mini kinds of literature. One of those that you find is a lament. We're probably most familiar with laments from the Psalms, but you have a whole book by Jeremiah called Lamentations. And a lament in general is a crying out to the Lord, usually under conditions that are externally brought on — enemies, famine, any kind of number of external conditions — but they're conditions that have come about by God's will. And their chief purpose is to turn people's hearts back to the Lord. And so, in lament you see part of God's purpose in those conditions working themselves out... You see, that's the point of lament. It's a crying out to God for salvation from those circumstances. And through those laments, especially as we believe that God uses secondary causes, including prayer, to bring about his will, those laments become a basis for God acting... If you just search for the expression in the Psalms "How long O Lord," you'll begin to see how frequently lament occurs in the prayers

of God's people, as well as in the prophets. Even Jesus, as he stood over Jerusalem, said, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... how often I would have gathered you to myself as a mother hen gathers her chicks, but you would not!" Even Jesus lamented, not for his own situation, but for the situation of his people. And perhaps one of the most profound laments is the beginning of Psalm 22:1, where the psalmists says, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" because if you realize that, in the end, ultimately, Christ himself takes on the full lament of his people, you see God answering the lament of his Son by delivering him from death. And by delivering him from death, delivering his people from the power of death and the curse of sin. And so, lament isn't just simply a cry to get out of a particular situation but laments in the Prophets create this arc, which actually leads us to Christ and his substitutionary work to deliver his people from all their sins and misery.

Question 6:

What kinds of messages did Old Testament prophets communicate to God's people?

Dr. Scott Redd

Biblical prophecy was a way for God to communicate to his covenant people in a way that would either encourage them to continue on the path on which they're on, or to dissuade them and to encourage them towards repentance that they might return to a path that they should be on. So biblical prophecy is not so much about prognostication as it is about proclamation of God's covenant requirements of his people, the blessings that he will offer them, the curses that will fall on them because of disobedience... We find a clear example of this in Jeremiah 18 where the prophet articulates that when God proclaims a blessing on a nation, and that nation turns away from the Lord, then that blessing will turn to a curse. Likewise, if God declares a curse on a nation and that nation repents and turns back to him, that curse will turn to blessing. So, you see, the purpose of prophecy is not so much to just tell something about the future, but it's really to change behavior, to call God's people to him, to call them to covenant faithfulness. We see this throughout the Old Testament... In the story of David and his son with Bathsheba, David is told that his son will die as a result of his sin with Bathsheba and against Uriah. However, David laments, and repents, and turns to the Lord saying, "Who knows? Maybe the Lord will take this judgment, this curse, away from me." David knew that true prophecy requires repentance, requires a response of faithfulness.

Dr. David T. Lamb

I think we tend to think the purpose of prophecy is to foretell distant events in the future, and certainly that happens in Scripture. But more often, I think, in the prophetic books at least, we find prophecy is to proclaim things that are going to happen soon — sometimes bad things, sometimes good things. In Isaiah 38, the prophet Isaiah speaks to the king Hezekiah, the king of Judah, and basically tells him, "You're going to die." Hezekiah prays, and God tells the prophet Isaiah, "Go back to

Hezekiah, and tell him that you're going to give him 15 more years." Now we don't tend to think of that as a prophecy, but Isaiah is clearly a prophet, and he is telling what's going to happen to Isaiah, and in this case, it's in the immediate future that Isaiah is telling Hezekiah, "You've got 15 more years to live." So that's obviously good news. And a lot of the texts in biblical prophecies are giving encouraging news, kind of like to Isaiah, from Isaiah to Hezekiah. Other texts, and I think at least in the prophetic books of the Old Testament, we find a lot of announcements of judgment. We see, well, Amos the prophet receives a number of visions. There is a vision in Amos 8 where God speaks to Amos and shows him a basket of summer fruit. Now we don't really fully understand what that means, but the fruit — the Hebrew there is *qayits*, which is actually a pun on *qets*, "the end," which is coming — and so, God is telling Amos through this vision of fruit that judgment is coming upon the northern kingdom of Israel. And when Amos received that prophecy, probably somewhere around 760 B.C., the judgment, the destruction of Assyria in 720, 722, was about 40 years away. So that's not too far away, but it's basically a pronouncement of judgment upon the people of the northern kingdom of Israel. Whereas, if you jump to a more familiar book, the story of Jonah, God told Jonah, you need to tell the people of Nineveh that judgment is coming. And so Jonah goes. He doesn't go initially — there's the whole fish incident in chapter 1 — but finally Jonah gets around, arrives in Nineveh in chapter 3, and he says, "Forty days and Nineveh will be destroyed." So, there we see an example of an immediate pronouncement of judgment — 40 days. Amazingly, the people of Nineveh repent, and God shows mercy upon the Ninevites, which, of course, makes Jonah mad. So, I think we see examples in biblical prophecy of proclamations of encouragement like Hezekiah, proclamations of judgment for Amos and Jonah, sometimes a little bit further in the future like 40 years for Amos, and often more immediately, with the story of Jonah. But ultimately, at least in Jonah's case, the prophecy was meant to be a warning to get people to repent, and it did. So I think we see a variety of reasons, but God is trying to speak to his people, whether it's a word of encouragement or a word of judgment, to call them back to himself.

Dr. Gordon H. Johnston

Biblical prophecy itself, when Yahweh inspired the prophets, it was primarily to move the people to obedience, so it wasn't so much content and information oriented as much as functional. Yahweh was primarily calling the people to obedience, calling them to repentance — for those that are already obedient, to persevere in faith and obedience; to those that are disobedient, to repent of their sins. So it's primarily to move the people. If you will, biblical prophecy, Yahweh would reveal to the people that judgment was coming, but for the purpose that this could be avoided if the people would repent. Or he would reveal to the people this is the blessing that's in the offing, but that was with the assumption that if they continued to persevere in faith and obedience. So, it's almost if you could think of a highway with exit ramps where the prophet would tell the people that they're on a path of danger, and this is what's at the end of the road, but there's an off-ramp. And so, it's not simply that this is set in stone, that there's a calendar that we have to fulfill in the future, but it's primarily

giving the people a providential edge, if you will, that “this is your fate, but this is fate that can be avoided if there’s repentance.”

Dr. Miles Van Pelt

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the twelve Minor Prophets, these prophets are fundamentally covenant lawyers. Their job is to execute Yahweh’s lawsuit against his people. His people throughout their history have disobeyed. The prophets announced that the people of God have disobeyed, and therefore, curses are coming. But after the curses, there’s always this notion of hope where the lawsuit is broken, and the Lord, through his prophet, offers the possibility of renewal, a new covenant, or a new temple, or the remnant returning, or things like this. And so they do more than talk about the future, although that’s a part of it. Their main point, however, is to show the people how, over the last several hundred years, they have fallen away from Yahweh, how they have broken his law, and how they have not loved him with all their hearts and souls and minds.

Question 7:

What is the significance of the cows of Bashan in the oracle of judgment from Amos 4?

Rev. Sherif Gendy, translation

The Bashan region existed to the northeast of the Jordan River and was famous for its fat herds of sheep and cows. The metaphor of “the cows of Bashan” is used many times in the Old Testament. For example, Psalm 22:12 says, “Many bulls encompass me; strong bulls of Bashan surround me.” The metaphor here is used to describe the enemies that oppressed and harmed the people. In Amos 4:1,

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria. Who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, “Bring, that we may drink!” (Amos 4:1).

It is talking here about the women of Samaria who asked their husbands for more prosperity. And they oppressed the poor and crushed the needy. In the history of Israel, when men’s leadership was declining, it was sort of God’s judgment over the people to appoint women or infants over them. “Infants” here refers to immature leadership. We can see an example of this in Isaiah 3:12:

My people — infants are their oppressors, and women rule over them (Isaiah 3:12).

So what happened during the days of Amos was that the women of Samaria mistreated the poor, oppressed the poor and abused the miserable and the needy. Therefore, the prophet described them as the fat cows of Bashan who abused others and asked for more things from their husbands, more wealth and properties, while abusing and oppressing the poor and the weak.

Dr. Donna Petter

If you're reading along in Amos 4:1, there's a woe oracle to the "cows of Bashan." But if you read on, those cows of Bashan are not cows on Mount Samaria, but they happen to be the women, the rich women, who are getting richer because of their greed, and therefore, this whole idea of figurative language — the cows of Bashan — is kind of like a sarcasm about the rich women in Samaria. And so, you have to have that as an understanding when you're reading the Prophets.

Question 8:**What are the elements of a covenant lawsuit?****Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

Whenever you talk about a covenant lawsuit you have to remember that every one of the so-called "forms" of prophetic speech have varieties. When you look at them in the actual Bible, in the text of the Bible, you notice they don't ever follow any particular format perfectly. They're never exactly the same. But when you think about a covenant lawsuit, the chief element of a covenant lawsuit is that the pieces or the dimensions of the courtroom scene of heaven are made rather explicit, and they're rather extensively described. That's as opposed to other sorts of oracles that are also involving the heavenly court, but the elements of the courtroom scene are not as explicit. But in a lawsuit, you'll have first, usually, some kind of description of the summons to court, that God will call certain people to the courtroom scene. And they'll come to the courtroom scene, and then God begins to speak as the judge. And sometimes, as the judge, God will say all kinds of different sorts of things like, "Why have you done this to me? How could you possibly, after all that I've done for you?" So, he'll complain as to why the defendant in the court — which is usually God's people, not always, but usually God's people — why they've done what they've done. And then, he'll start accusing them and telling them of all the things that they have done that are wrong and how they violated the covenant; so he addresses their sins next. And then, usually, there's some kind of declaration of guilt — "You're guilty for having done these things." And then, at the end of most lawsuits, there's some kind of sentencing. Usually the sentence of a lawsuit is, it's not going to go well for you. Judgment is going to come against you. Divine judgment is going to come against you in some form or another. But the interesting thing about Hosea is that his first covenant lawsuit in chapter 2 has this sort of strange ending to it. The sentencing does have the condemnation of judgment that's coming against the people of God in the northern kingdom of Israel, but that sentencing also has, added to it at the end, a word of blessing and a word of forgiveness that will come after the judgment in the future.

Dr. Douglas Gropp

A number of the prophetic judgment speeches could be said to take the form of a covenant lawsuit. The idea of a covenant lawsuit is based on international diplomacy, and our best exemplars of it are in Hittite diplomatic letters that we have, where a

Hittite diplomat goes to the vassal nation and prosecutes the terms of the treaty that was signed unto by the vassal king, but is now being violated. The prophet assumes that sort of role. And there is a number of key passages that have a fuller exemplification of those elements. In its fullness those elements would include a summons to the defendants and witnesses. Those witnesses could be heaven and earth, hills and mountains, such as we have in Micah 6. Those very witnesses are listed at the end of lists of witnesses in Hittite treaties. So, they echo the Hittite treaties. Then there would be an element that follows that gives a history of the covenant relationship between the suzerain, the great king, and the vassal king, followed by an indictment of the vassal for violating the treaty, which in turn would be followed by either a threat or a sentence for that violation of the treaty... That only applies in its fullness to, let's say, a handful of prophetic passages, but at the heart of prophetic judgment speeches are the two central elements of a covenant lawsuit and the indictment of the Israelites and the threat of judgment or sentence on the Israelites for their violation of God's covenant. And we could argue whether those should be part of the covenant form or just a more general judgment speech.

Question 9:

What are some of the blessings we receive from the new covenant prophesied in Jeremiah 31?

Dr. Charles Quarles

There are a couple of key Old Testament passages when it comes to understanding the new covenant — one is Jeremiah 31, the other is Ezekiel 36. Other texts discuss the new covenant, but these are the fundamental ones. And those texts show us that the new covenant has two primary foci. On the one hand, the new covenant promises the forgiveness of sins. Ezekiel 36 speaks of us being cleansed of our iniquities and our uncleanness. Jeremiah 31:34 speaks of God remembering our sin no more. So, obviously, there's a big focus on the forgiveness of sin, and that's normally our focus when we speak of the new covenant. But the new covenant actually entails far more. Not only is there forgiveness of sin, but there is a radical transformation of the person that results in a dramatic change in behavior. And Jeremiah says it this way; he says that God will write his law upon our hearts. And the idea is that the very heart is transformed so that we begin to naturally and spontaneously exhibit the righteousness of God's own character. Ezekiel said it a little bit differently, but the point is the same. He said that God would give us a new heart, and he said that God would grant us the Holy Spirit and that the Spirit would move us to keep God's commandments and fulfill his ordinances. And Jesus does both. Through his sacrificial death, he provides for us forgiveness of sin. But in addition to that, he fulfills the promise of John the Baptist where he says, "The one who is coming after me is mightier than I am. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit," referring back to the promise of the new covenant in Ezekiel 36. And when Christ writes God's law upon our hearts, when he places his Holy Spirit in us, it changes our very identity, it changes our very nature so that we begin to naturally and spontaneously exhibit the character of the holy God.

Dr. Mark Saucy

The benefits that we get from the new covenant, from Jesus, I think, start to be enumerated right in the original passage of the new covenant, or at least where that term is used in the Old Testament, and that's Jeremiah 31. In verse 33 and 34, there is an enumeration, or a listing, of the benefits that come in the new covenant that would be coming in the age to come and it starts out with the law written in your hearts. And then you have, if you bring in other passages, about the law is going to be written by the Spirit that God is going to put within the individual, in their heart. Then it moves into questions of knowledge of God. And then it will move into, also, questions of the access that we have to God. And I think, in the Prophets, it also moves into things that are going to happen socially through a restored nation, and it's going to affect all nations and finally the world. And so, we bring these to Christ. Christ is the one who poured out the Spirit at his ascension. That's what Pentecost was about. That is what makes and activates the new covenant age finally for all people who will be found in it by faith. And so, what he does in regeneration, what he does on the heart, what he makes us with a new love, all of the language of the New Testament, that's new covenant promise that Jesus has already initiated. The knowledge of God, a powerful demonstration of this is when the temple veil rent at the crucifixion that showed that the system that was mediating access to God by a cast, by a priestly cast, by calendar, by clean and uncleanness, definitions of the old covenant, those are done now. And access is now in a new open way. God welcomes us without a priesthood, without coming on a particular day. And so, this kind of knowledge of God is. And the most profound benefit, I would go back to that passage in Jeremiah is in verse 34 where he says, "Because I will forgive your sins." There's the foundation of the new covenant, and there's where we see the interface of the crucifixion, the cross of Christ, to the new covenant reality in the life. The sin problem God solved, and so all of the other benefits could be poured out.

Dr. Greg Perry

In Jeremiah 31, the prophet says that the Lord is going to make a covenant with Israel and Judah that is not like the covenant that he had made with their fathers. And what we see in the New Testament is that very early on Jesus himself refers to the language of Jeremiah. It's interesting that the higher critics often talk about Paul is the one who sort of develops this idea of the atonement. But actually, it's Jesus himself who bears witness at the Last Supper when he breaks bread and when he offers the cup. He says that the cup — in Luke's gospel, chapter 22 — he says, "This is the new covenant in my blood." And, of course, the main text that we see in the New Testament that elaborates and explains this further is in the epistle to the Hebrews in chapters 8 through 10. The longest quotation from the Old Testament in the New is a quotation from Jeremiah 31. It articulates that Jesus, with his own blood, has offered sacrifice for our sins, not the blood of bulls and goats, but with his own blood, and says that he is the mediator of the new covenant. One of the things that is really new about the new covenant is a definitive offering for sin, a sacrifice for sin. And so, the writer to the Hebrews says very clearly, he says that when this forgiveness is given there is no more need for a sacrifice for sin. So, Jesus fulfills the requirements of the new covenant in that way. And then we see it in other places in the New Testament.

Another aspect of the new covenant is going to be the giving of the Spirit in the hearts of the people of God. And so, Luke tells us in Acts 2 that it's the risen Christ who pours out the Spirit and fulfills that aspect of the new covenant. And then, also, we see in the book of Ezekiel another aspect of the new covenant is that God himself will shepherd his people. And so, in John's gospel, in John 10, we see Jesus talking about himself as the good Shepherd, the one who shepherds the flock of God's people.

Question 10:

What does repentance from sin look like?

Dr. Bill Ury

The Bible shows repentance in some very visual ways. I love Hebrew; I've always loved the language because it's so pictorial. The word for repentance, the basic word, is *shub*, which means "to turn." And that's what it looks like basically. It's the choice to turn from sin. Now, of course, that turning is enabled by the gracious work of God. There's no way that anyone could turn from any sin without God enabling that turning. In Greek, the word for repentance is *metanoia*, which is a change of mind. And of course, the mind is not just the mental mind; it's a change of the whole orientation of one's life. Second Corinthians speaks about having a godly sorrow. And I'm sure we have pictures of what that means with tears and beating one's breast because we're in agony, and that may be sufficient at some points for repentance, but I think the much more deep conception, that just my emotional repenting is a foundational turning of my being, to say, Lord, I have run my life one way, and it's gotten me nothing but hell, hell in my life and hell maybe in the future. So I am turning toward you. I am turning all of my self-trust to trust you... I no longer am going to go that way or treat another person that way. So, it looks like typical response in daily life to a person you love. I want my life to please that person's heart or mind. And so I willingly repent, lovingly repent day by day, because I love that one more than I love myself. So, there can be godly sorrow in a graphic way, there can be turning of one's entire existence fundamentally to become a Christian, but there's also a daily repentance, which is the expression of love that I think we see throughout Scripture and, I know, throughout church history. I think that's why repentance is so important and sort of, what it looks like in real life.

Dr. Robert G. Lister

Repentance from sin involves turning from that sin. But insofar as it is evangelical repentance, it's not just turning away from something. It is also at the same time turning towards something. That something is a *someone*; it's Jesus, and we turn towards him in faith. So, there's an abandonment of my sin and a turn towards Christ in faith. At the same time, we could probably think through or tease out perhaps a couple of different dimensions of what that repentance involves, or looks like. One of those is an intellectual, or cognitive, awareness of my sin. I'm not likely to repent where I don't identify as a sinner and understand that I have broken God's laws in some way, shape or form. So, it has to be a sense of awareness, knowledge,

conviction that I am a sinner and that what I've done is wrong in the eyes of God. At the same time, however, it is possible that someone could, sort of, conceptually recognize, "what I've done is displeasing to God," and also not care about it. So, the second dimension would be a dimension of remorse, an emotional conviction that not only have I done something wrong, but I regret it. I'm displeased by it. I have sort of the grief towards my sin that God has as well. Those two components, then, in tandem, lead to the third component which is the exercise of the will, or the volitional capacity to turn from that sin as a promise or pleasure that was insufficient to deliver on what it promised, and turn towards Christ instead as the basis of superior promises and pleasures.

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He Gave Us Prophets

LESSON
SEVEN

THE PURPOSE OF PREDICTIONS



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He Gave Us Prophets

Lesson Seven

The Purpose of Predictions

INTRODUCTION

Anyone who reads Old Testament prophecy soon discovers that the prophets made many predictions, and if you ask most people why there are so many predictions in the prophets, they will tell you very simply — it was to tell us about the future. We're going to learn in this lesson that the prophets did not make their predictions primarily to inform us of the future, but rather, they gave predictions to encourage the people of God to form the future.

We've entitled this lesson "The Purpose of Predictions" because we're going to explore why the prophets spoke about the future. To discover the purpose of predictions, we're going to explore four different topics: First, how did the prophets understand divine sovereignty over history? Second, what did the prophets believe about their predictions and human contingencies? Third, how did the prophets understand the certainties of their predictions? And fourth, what were the goals of predictions in Old Testament prophecy? Let's look first at how the sovereignty of God over history shaped the prophets' understanding of their predictions.

DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY

Have you ever noticed that Christians, like all people, tend to go to extremes? Either we eat too much or we eat too little, or we exercise too much or we exercise too little. Well, something like that happens also in theology. Many times when we think about theological concepts we go to extremes, and this is especially true with the subject of the sovereignty of God. We find some Christians who emphasize God's sovereignty over history to the point that they exclude the reality of human responsibility, and then we find other people who emphasize the significance of human choice and human responsibility to the point that they deny the sovereignty of God. There's so much confusion in the church at this point over these kinds of concepts that we must pause for a moment to see the Bible's view of the sovereignty of God and human responsibility. The Bible's doctrine of the sovereignty of God provides an essential background for understanding the way prophets predicted the future.

There are many ways we can approach the subject of God's sovereignty, but we're going to take a look at two traditional theological themes: first, God's immutability; and second, God's providence. Let's look first at what the Bible says about divine immutability.

GOD'S IMMUTABILITY

Put simply, the doctrine of immutability teaches that God is unchanging. Now, we have to be careful when we speak this way because God is not immutable or unchanging, in every way we might imagine. For many centuries traditional systematic theology has been careful to identify specific ways in which God is unchanging. In fact, there are only three major ways in which God may be spoken of as immutable.

God's Character

In the first place, God's character does not change. God is always loving, always just, always knowing all things, always all powerful, always present everywhere. God's attributes never vary with time. This is what the writer of Hebrews meant when he wrote in Hebrews 13:8:

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever (Hebrews 13:8).

God cannot become something other than he is. We can count on his character to remain the same because his attributes are immutable.

Covenant Promises

There's another sense in which God is immutable beyond his character or attributes. That immutability has to do with his covenant promises. When God makes a covenant oath, it remains valid forever and it will never be broken. Once again, the writer of Hebrews succinctly summarized the teaching of the Scriptures in this matter. In Hebrews 6:16-17 we read these words:

Men swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath (Hebrews 6:16-17).

As this passage makes clear, when God takes an oath in covenant, we can be sure that he will not vary from what he has said.

Eternal Counsel

A third way in which the Scriptures teach that God is immutable is with regard to his eternal counsel, or his eternal plan for the universe. Although some Christian groups

fail to see this teaching in Scripture, everything we say in this lesson is built on the belief that God has an unchangeable plan and that this plan governs all of history. It helps to summarize this doctrine in a traditional way by referring to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. In the *Westminster Confession of Faith* chapter 3, paragraph 1 we read these words about the eternal plan of God:

God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass.

This confessional statement expresses the sovereignty of God in a very clear way. Put simply, God has a plan for the universe. It is all-comprehensive, and it cannot fail. The apostle Paul spoke of this plan of God in his epistles. For instance, in Ephesians 1:11 he wrote these words:

[God] works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will (Ephesians 1:11).

According to the apostle, God has a plan that includes everything, and God will work all things according to that plan.

The prophet Isaiah spoke of this all-encompassing plan of God. In Isaiah 46:9-11 we read these words from the prophet:

I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, “My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all my good pleasure” ... Truly, I have spoken; truly, I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it (Isaiah 46:9-11, literal).

It's very important to understand that the prophets believed in the biblical doctrine of the immutability of God. God is unchangeable in his character, in his covenant promises, and in his eternal plan for the universe. And so no matter what happened in the history of Israel, the prophets understood that God would always be true to his character. They understood he would always keep his firm covenant promises, and they also knew that God's counsel and his control over all things would never fail. As we read the prophets, we'll discover many times terrible things happened, but this confidence in God's immutability always sustained them.

Having seen that the immutability of God formed a background for all prophetic predictions, we must also remember the other side of the coin. The doctrine of God's immutability must be balanced with the doctrine of God's providence.

GOD'S PROVIDENCE

The providence of God may be defined as God's active involvement in history as he works out his eternal plan for the universe. According to the Scriptures, God does not

distance himself from his creation simply watching his immutable plan unfold. Instead, he has a role for himself in his eternal plan. This is why the Bible often speaks of God as the living God. It is because he is an actor on the stage of history and constantly interacts with his creation in providence. Once again, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* can help us understand these matters plainly. In chapter 5, paragraph 2 we read these words about the providence of God:

Although, in relation to the foreknowledge and decrees of God, the first Cause, all things come to pass immutably, and infallibly; yet, by the same providence, he ordereth them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.

Here we see, first, that from an eternal perspective the plan of God will be accomplished without fail, immutably and infallibly. But we also see that from an historical, providential perspective, God works out his plan by interacting with his creation in different ways. He interacts with second causes, or creaturely causes, in at least three different ways. God works out his plan by ordering events so that they follow each other either necessarily, freely, or contingently. These distinctions are important, so let's unpack them just a little bit.

Sometimes the providence of God causes things to happen necessarily. The events that are in mind here are things that take place according to the regular laws of nature, laws like the law of gravity. The laws of nature provide predictable and necessary patterns of providence, yet at the same time, the *Confession of Faith* also states that some events occur freely. In other words, they appear random from a human point of view. Rolling the dice, weather patterns, and other things in life like this are ultimately under the control of God, but they seem, from a human vantage point, to be at random or freely associated. Finally, the *Confession of Faith* tells us that some things happen in history contingently. Of course, God was always in charge of all these events, but he controlled the direction of history in these cases by interacting with the contingencies of human choice.

The prophets not only believed that God's eternal plan would be absolutely accomplished without fail, but they also believed that God's plan involved human choice and human reaction. This fact played such a central role in the prophetic ministry that we must take a look at it very carefully. With a background of divine immutability and providence in mind, we may now turn to our second topic: predictions and contingencies.

PREDICTIONS AND CONTINGENCIES

So far, we've seen that sometimes God works out his eternal plan through the contingencies of human choice. At this point, what we're going to see is that these kinds of human contingencies had a significant effect on the predictions of Old Testament prophecy. Sometimes human choice intervening between the prophetic prediction and the fulfillment of that prophecy could have a significant influence on the outcome of history.

To explore the relationship between predictions and contingencies, we need to touch on two subjects: first, the general patterns that the Bible teaches us to expect; and, second, some specific examples of this dynamic.

GENERAL PATTERNS

Let's look first at the basic or general pattern involving predictions and historical contingencies. Perhaps the best passage in the prophets for helping us see this general pattern is Jeremiah 18:1-10. This passage is so important that we should look at it carefully. We'll touch on three aspects of this passage: first, Jeremiah's observation in 18:1-4; second, the Lord's explanation in verses 5 and 6; and third, the Lord's elaboration in verses 7 through 10.

Observation

Listen first to Jeremiah's observation in verses 1 through 4:

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: "Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message." So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him (Jeremiah 18:1-4).

God tells Jeremiah to go to a potter's house. Jeremiah entered the potter's house where he saw the potter working in one way with the clay and then changing his design when he saw the clay become marred. The potter worked with the lump of clay, shaping it as seemed best to him. Jeremiah's observation at the potter's house had an important symbolic value that God wanted Jeremiah to see. So, in verses 5 and 6 the Lord told Jeremiah the significance of this experience:

Then the word of the Lord came to me: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?" declares the Lord. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel" (Jeremiah 18:5-6).

Explanation

This passage reads as many do in the Bible; the potter represented the Lord and the clay represented Israel. As this passage makes clear, God reserved the right to do with his people as seemed best to him, just like a potter would with his clay. Of course, as we have seen, God would never violate his immutable character, nor his covenants, nor his

eternal plan. Yet, within these parameters, God is free to vary the ways he handles his people.

Elaboration

With the potter's observation and then God's explanation in mind, we're in a position to see how God elaborated on this event. In a word, God applied this analogy of the potter and the clay to prophetic predictions. In the first place, God mentioned predictions of judgment in verses 7 and 8:

If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned (Jeremiah 18:7-8).

Notice the way God described the situation. He says that at any time, with respect to any nation, he may announce judgment to come. Yet, if there is an intervening historical contingency of repentance, then God may relent. The fulfillment may not take place as predicted. In a word, the historical contingency of human choice could make a big difference in the way God fulfilled a prophecy of judgment.

Now to show that this principle applied also to other kinds of predictions, God spoke of predictions of blessing in verses 9 and 10:

And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it (Jeremiah 18:9-10).

Notice the parallel situation. God said that at any time, and with respect to any nation, he may announce the blessing of security and prosperity; yet, if there is an intervening historical contingency of rebellion and disobedience, then the result may be that God may relent from doing the good he had intended.

Jeremiah 18 teaches us a principle that we must be ready to apply to every biblical prophecy. God told Jeremiah that he was free to react to the way human beings responded to threats of judgment and offers of blessing. As we take a look at biblical prophecy, we'll discover that God often watched to see how people would react to the prophetic word and then determined what to do in their future.

SPECIFIC EXAMPLES

Now that we've seen the general principle of predictions and contingencies, it will be helpful to see some examples of this principle at work. There are countless examples of times in the Bible when the contingency of human choice made a big difference in the

fulfillment of prophecies. We're going to look at just two examples of the many times this dynamic appears: first, a predication by the prophet Shemaiah, and then the prediction of Jonah.

Prediction of Shemaiah

Let's look first at the prediction of Shemaiah. In 2 Chronicles 12:5 we read Shemaiah's announcement of judgment:

Then the prophet Shemaiah came to Rehoboam and to the leaders of Judah who had assembled in Jerusalem for fear of Shishak, and he said to them, "This is what the Lord says, 'You have abandoned me; therefore, I now abandon you to Shishak'" (2 Chronicles 12:5).

Notice that Shemaiah did not offer any explicit conditions for this prophecy. For people unfamiliar with the ministries of the prophets, it sounds as if Shemaiah revealed an eternal, unchangeable decree of God. But Rehoboam and the leaders of Judah knew better. They hoped that these words were just a warning from God, a warning of what God was going to do if they did not repent. So we find in 12:6 these words:

The leaders of Israel and the king humbled themselves and said, "The Lord is just" (2 Chronicles 12:6).

When Rehoboam and the leaders of Judah heard the prophecy of judgment, they knew what to do. They were to call out to God in repentance and faith, seeking for his mercy.

As we continue to read this passage, the intervening historical contingency of humble prayer had a dramatic effect on the fulfillment of Shemaiah's prediction. In fact, Shemaiah himself acknowledged this effect. Listen to what he said after the leaders of Judah repented. In verses 7 and 8 we read these words:

When the Lord saw that they humbled themselves, this word of the Lord came to Shemaiah: "Since they have humbled themselves, I will not destroy them, but will soon give them deliverance. My wrath will not be poured out on Jerusalem through Shishak. They will, however, become subject to him, so that they may learn the difference between serving me and serving the kings of other lands" (2 Chronicles 12:7-8).

This passage makes clear that Shemaiah's ministry was much like that of preachers today. He warned of judgment to come, not so that he could condemn people to everlasting perdition, but so that the people would hear this warning, repent, and then receive the grace of God. So we see that the human reaction of prayer made a significant difference in the way that Shemaiah's prophecy would be fulfilled. In this case, Shemaiah's prophecy was not utterly reversed, but it was mollified, or softened, so that the attack against Jerusalem was not as great as it would have been.

Prediction of Jonah

A second example of the influence of human reactions to predictions appears in the book of Jonah. The story of Jonah is familiar to us. We know that God sent Jonah to the city of Nineveh to announce judgment to come. In Jonah 3:4 this is what Jonah says:

Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned (Jonah 3:4).

What could be simpler than this prophecy? Jonah announced that the city of Nineveh had only forty more days before it would be destroyed. There were no “ifs,” there were no “ands,” and there were no “buts.” But what happened? The rest of the chapter tells us. The king of Nineveh and the people along with their animals put on sackcloth and ashes in repentance of their sins. The king announced in 3:7-9:

Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish (Jonah 3:7-9).

Put simply, an intervening historical contingency of repentance took place before the prophecy could be fulfilled. The people humbled themselves in repentance before the Lord. And what was the result of this historical contingency? In 3:10 we read these words:

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened (Jonah 3:10).

The fulfillment of Jonah’s prediction was tremendously influenced by the repentance of Nineveh. He later complained to the Lord in this way in 4:2:

I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity (Jonah 4:2).

Even as he gave his prediction, Jonah knew that God might not carry out the destruction of the city. In fact, it was not until over one hundred years later that Nineveh was destroyed by the Babylonians.

From the general principle of Jeremiah 18 and these two specific examples, we see that many times the contingency of human choice influenced the ways that prophecies were fulfilled. Sometimes God reversed a judgment or a blessing; sometimes he would soften a blessing or even lessen a judgment; and other times he would increase

judgments or increase blessings, depending upon how human beings responded to the prophetic word.

Now that we have seen that intervening historical contingencies can influence the fulfillments of predictions, we should turn to our next subject. What certainty or confidence could Old Testament believers have when they heard a prediction? How confident could they be that God would fulfill the predictions made by the prophets?

CERTAINTY OF PREDICTIONS

To answer this question it will help to review the kinds of predictions we find in Old Testament prophecy. As we have seen in previous lessons, one axis along which we may place Old Testament predictions is their variation between covenant blessings and judgments. Prophetic predictions may be classified as announcing God's blessings in nature and war and his judgments in nature and war. We've seen another organizational axis in previous lessons as well. All prophetic predictions fall somewhere along the range of greater and lesser judgments and blessings. You will recall that many kinds of small blessings and judgments were announced by the prophets, but the greatest judgment was the threat of exile and the greatest blessing was restoration after exile. This basic approach to prophetic predictions helps us see at a glance the basic message that the prophets gave to their original audiences.

At this point, however, we need to add a third dimension to our organization of prophetic predictions. Old Testament prophets not only told their listeners about greater or lesser blessings and judgments, they also indicated, in one way or another, the level of God's determination to carry through with these judgments. On one end of the spectrum, the prophets told their listeners that God had a very low level of determination to carry through with a particular scenario. On the other end of the spectrum, they indicated that God was very highly determined to carry through with the predictions. It's very important to remember that when the prophets speak of God having high or low levels of determination to carry out a prophecy, they are speaking of him in very human terms. In terms of God's eternal, unchangeable plan, God would always accomplish all that he desired. But when God was interacting with human creatures and working out his plan in providence, he sometimes revealed that his determination was very high, and other times he revealed that his determination was very low.

CONDITIONAL PREDICTIONS

There are many ways to approach this dimension of Old Testament predictions, but we will point to four different points along the spectrum of God's determination. In the first place, the prophets made a number of predictions which reveal that God had not yet committed history to one direction or another. They did this by qualifying their predictions with explicit conditions. Explicit conditions in the form of "if...then" statements appear many times in the Old Testament prophets. For instance, in Isaiah 1:19-20 we read this conditional prediction:

“If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land; but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.” For the mouth of the Lord has spoken (Isaiah 1:19-20).

In this passage, the prophet Isaiah makes it very clear that the people of God had a choice. If they submitted themselves to the Lord, they would be blessed, but if they did not, they would be judged. Many times, the prophets indicate these kinds of conditions to let the people know that God was still open to the direction that history would take, and that direction would be determined by the kinds of choices they made.

UNQUALIFIED PREDICTIONS

A second point along the axis of determination appears in unqualified predictions. These passages are simple statements about the future. No explicit conditions appear in them. In such cases, the prophets revealed that at the moment God was more determined to take the future in a particular direction. But we know from the outcomes of these predictions that higher levels of human response could turn events in different directions. We’ve already seen one example of this kind of prediction. In Jonah 3:4 the prophet said these words:

Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned (Jonah 3:4).

There are no explicit conditions in this prophecy, and the prophet Jonah is making it clear that God was determined to destroy the city. Even so, the significant and widespread repentance within the city of Nineveh caused God to delay his judgment against that city.

Covenant blessings also appear in the form of unqualified predictions. Listen to what Haggai said to Zerubbabel in Haggai 2:21-23:

“Tell Zerubbabel governor of Judah that I will shake the heavens and the earth. I will overturn royal thrones and shatter the power of foreign kingdoms... On that day,” declares the Lord Almighty, “I will take you, my servant Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel ... and I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you” (Haggai 2:21-23).

This passage makes it very clear that God was ready to destroy the nations surrounding Israel and to make Zerubbabel the king over his people.

There are no explicit conditions, yet we know that this never happened. Zerubbabel never became the king over God’s people and the nations around Israel were not destroyed. Why was this so? It was because the post-exilic community failed to be obedient to the Lord and this human contingency had an effect on the way the prophecy was fulfilled.

CONFIRMED PREDICTIONS

Although some predictions represent God as open to many possibilities, Old Testament prophets also indicated sometimes that God had a higher degree of determination to take events in a particular direction. They communicated God's higher determination by showing that God confirmed certain predictions. There are two primary ways in which Old Testament prophets confirmed their predictions: first, God indicated his higher determination with words; second, he showed his intentions with signs. Let's look first at verbal confirmations God offered to his people.

Words

One of the best examples of verbal confirmation appears in the first chapter of Amos. Listen to what the prophet Amos says in 1:3 of his book:

For three sins of Damascus, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath (Amos 1:3).

The words, "I will not turn back," form a repeated feature of the predictions of this chapter. Why did God repeat this sentence again and again? He wanted to communicate that he had a high level of determination to carry through with these judgments. But did this confirmation mean that there was no way to avoid the judgment of God? The prophet made it very clear that sincere and thorough repentance could still avert the wrath of God. Listen to what the Lord said in Amos 5:4 and 6:

This is what the Lord says to the house of Israel: "Seek me and live ... Seek the Lord and live, or he will sweep through the house of Joseph like fire" (Amos 5:4, 6).

Amos chapters 1 and 2 show that God was highly determined to send his wrathful fire even against Israel, but this passage demonstrates that sincere and extensive repentance might still have an effect on the wrath of God. Many passages in Old Testament prophecy are like this. The prophets indicate how highly determined God is by using words to confirm his determination. They did this in order to motivate their listeners to seek God earnestly and to repent sincerely.

Signs

Prophets not only added verbal confirmations of God's heightened determination, they also revealed higher levels of divine intention by coupling their predictions with signs. Throughout the Old Testament, we find that prophets performed various signs and symbolic actions to make it clear that God had very high levels of determination to do

certain things. When a sign accompanied a prophecy, it showed that God was very determined to carry out what the prophet had predicted.

One very clear example of this practice appears in Isaiah 7. You'll recall that Isaiah warned Ahaz that he should trust God as the Syrians and the Israelites were coming against him. But Ahaz refused, and so God said this to him in Isaiah 7:11:

Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights (Isaiah 7:11).

Isaiah offered the king confirmation that God would take care of him, but in hypocrisy Ahaz refused. So God gave a sign, but instead of being a sign of salvation it became a sign of condemnation.

So we see that the prophets not only gave conditional predictions and unqualified predictions, they also confirmed many of their prophecies with words and signs to reveal that God had a high level of determination to carry through in a particular direction.

SWORN PREDICTIONS

A fourth type of prediction reveals in no uncertain terms that God was fully determined to carry out what He said through the prophets. These types of predictions take the form of divine oaths.

Often the words of prophets simply announce that God has sworn to do something. For instance, in Amos 4:2 God takes an oath that the rich women of Samaria will be taken away by enemies. Listen to how the prophet says it:

The Sovereign Lord has sworn by his holiness: "The time will surely come when you will be taken away with hooks" (Amos 4:2).

Another oath formula appears in Ezekiel 5:11. There we read these words:

Therefore as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, because you have defiled my sanctuary with all your vile images ... I myself will withdraw my favor (Ezekiel 5:11).

When God adds an oath to a prophetic prediction, it raises that prediction to the level of a covenantal certainty. God took oaths in his covenants that he would carry out all that he said he would do. When the prophets add a divine oath to a prediction, it indicates that God is absolutely determined to carry through with what he had said.

Now, while it is true that God was utterly determined to carry out predictions qualified by oaths, we must still see that there is some latitude for God to react to intervening historical contingencies in some ways. Often the question of "when" remains in the balance; timing can be influenced by the reactions of people who hear a prediction. Second, precisely who will experience the prediction often remains a flexible matter. And third, the means by which a prediction will take place is often left unspecified. And fourth, to what degree a prediction will be fulfilled always remains an open question.

Consider the oath of judgment found in Amos 6:8:

The Sovereign Lord has sworn by himself — the Lord Almighty declares: “I abhor the pride of Jacob and detest his fortresses; I will deliver up the city and everything in it” (Amos 6:8).

Although earlier in his book Amos left the possibility of escape, it is clear at this point that Amos utterly condemns Samaria to destruction. Yet it’s also evident that this oath does not answer questions that still remain open, such as, when? Will this destruction happen soon, or will it be postponed? Who or which people precisely will die, be exiled, or who will escape, is still left open, and by what precise means God will destroy is not specified. And in fact, to what degree this destruction must take place is open as well. These questions remain to be answered in the light of the reactions which the Israelites had. Their prayers and repentance, their rebellion and defiance, could make tremendous differences in the fulfillment of this prediction.

A similar situation held true for divine oaths of blessing. For instance, in Isaiah 62:8 we read this oath to those who returned from exile:

The Lord has sworn by his right hand and by his mighty arm: “Never again will I give your grain as food for your enemies, and never again will foreigners drink the new wine for which you have toiled” (Isaiah 62:8).

It is clear from this passage that God swore to bring his people back to the Promised Land, and so the people could be sure that this prediction would take place. Still, there were questions that remained: When would God do this? Who would be brought back to the land? By what means would he accomplish this restoration? And to what degree would this restoration take place? In prophecies with oaths, these kinds of questions always remain open.

So we see that Old Testament prophets indicated that God had different degrees of determination to direct the future in one way or another. Some prophecies explicitly indicated that they were wide open. Others are implicit in this regard. Still other prophecies were confirmed by words and signs. And, finally, some predictions were made sure by divine oaths.

As we study the predictions of Old Testament prophets it is always important to remember the connection between predictions and intervening historical contingencies. God had various levels of determination to carry through with what the prophets said, and we’ll be at a great disadvantage if we don’t remember these various levels of determination.

GOALS OF PREDICTION

Now that we’ve seen how the prophets understood the certainty of their predictions, we’re in a position to discern the goals of prophetic predictions. Why did the

prophets make predictions? What were their purposes? To answer this question, we need to touch on, first, popular perspectives, and second, correct perspectives on the purpose of predictions.

POPULAR PERSPECTIVES

Let's look first at a widespread misconception of the purpose of Old Testament predictions. If there's one dominant view of the purpose of predictions in the Old Testament, it can be summed up in the word "prognostication." As we know, when medical professionals speak of a prognosis, they're telling us what they think the outcome of an illness or a condition may be in the future. In many ways, this is the way many Christians understand the prophets. They believe that prophets simply foretold the future; they gave foreknowledge of things to come. Now, there is an element of truth in this view. The prophets reveal that at any given time God was determined to go this way or that way. Yet we must always remember that intervening historical contingencies could have significant effects on the ways that prophecies were fulfilled.

One passage stands behind this popular preoccupation with prognostication, and that is Deuteronomy 18:20-22. In this passage, Moses declared a criterion by which Israel was to determine if a prophet was a true or false prophet. Verse 21 amounts to a question which Moses asked on the behalf of the Israelites:

You may say to yourselves, "How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the Lord?" (Deuteronomy 18:21).

Verse 22 gives a response to that question:

If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him (Deuteronomy 18:22).

A widespread misunderstanding of this passage runs something like this: if a true prophet of the Lord says anything, then that thing must happen just as he said it. But to apply Moses' test of a true prophet properly, we must remember what we have already seen in this lesson. We must not approach the words of prophets woodenly. We have to consider the intentions behind prophetic predictions. When prophets spoke, they did not always intend to give the impression that what they were predicting was absolutely certain. Their words revealed, sometimes explicitly and other times implicitly, that human reactions could influence the fulfillment of a prediction. So, when we apply Moses' test of prophets, we always have to ask not just what did the prophet say explicitly, but also what implicit conditions apply to their predictions.

Moses and Israel knew that this was true of prophecy. They knew that only divine oaths secured the certainty of a future event. They also knew that when prophets spoke words of judgment, the prophets usually did not utterly condemn to judgment, but simply warned of judgment. They understood that unless prophets indicated a divine oath had

taken place, they did not promise blessing, but offered blessing. In these cases, Moses' tests would have to be qualified by the occurrence of significant intervening historical contingencies. In other words, so long as some significant human reaction did not affect the process, then Moses' tests would apply easily. Otherwise, the possibility of God's response would have to be factored in. Onlookers would have to ask the question, did significant intervening historical contingencies occur? If they did, then Moses' tests would have to be adjusted appropriately.

CORRECT PERSPECTIVES

If it is a misconception to think that prognostication was the main goal of prophecy, then what was the main purpose for prophetic predictions? Simply put, the prophets spoke of a future primarily to motivate or to activate their listeners. Another way to put it was that the prophets did not want so much to inform their listeners about the future as much as they wanted to activate their listeners to form the future.

To understand this outlook on prophetic predictions, it will help to look at the way Old Testament believers responded to the predictions of prophets. First, we will see what we call the "Who knows?" reaction; and then second, we'll see what we may call the "twofold" reaction. These reactions of the people of God will help us see the goals of prophetic predictions more clearly.

"Who Knows?" Reaction

In the first place, we should look at the "Who knows?" reaction. On three occasions in the Old Testament, when people heard a prophetic prediction, they had a reaction that may seem strange to us. Instead of saying, "Well, now we know what the future holds," they said, "Who knows?" or, as they said in Hebrew, *mi yode'a* (מִי יוֹדֵעַ).

This "Who knows?" reaction took place in three situations worth noting. First, when Nathan confronted David over his adultery with Bathsheba, he made this prediction to him in 2 Samuel 12:14:

Because by doing this you have made the enemies of the Lord show utter contempt, the son born to you will die (2 Samuel 12:14).

Nathan predicted that David's son would die, and as we find out, he did. But David later explained to the people in his court what he was thinking after Nathan had given his prediction, but before the child had actually died. He says these words in 2 Samuel 12:22:

While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, "Who knows? The Lord may be gracious to me and let the child live." But now that he is dead, why should I fast? (2 Samuel 12:22).

Instead of accepting the prophetic word as inevitable, David still wondered if the prediction could be averted through prayer and repentance. His efforts did not work because his son died anyway, but David's attitude is clear. Until the child actually died, David held out hope, the hope of "Who knows?"

In a similar way, the prophet Jonah told the city of Nineveh that judgment was coming. In 3:4 of his book, we read this prediction:

Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned (Jonah 3:4).

Once again, we might have expected the people of Nineveh simply to accept the prophet's prediction as inevitable, but they did not. Instead, they responded as David did. In Jonah 3:9 the king of Nineveh said:

Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion and turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish (Jonah 3:9).

On a third occasion, the same reaction to prophecy takes place. In Joel 2:1-11 the prophet announced that a terrible judgment was coming against Jerusalem. Yet Joel nevertheless encouraged his listeners to repent and fast. His reason for encouraging repentance and fasting is made clear in 2:14. There, we read these words:

Who knows? [God] may turn and have pity (Joel 2:14).

Joel was convinced that so long as his prediction was not completely fulfilled, it was good for the people to seek God's forgiveness because no one could know just how God might react to that intervening historical contingency.

What do these "Who knows?" reactions teach us about Old Testament believers? Old Testament believers did not think that prophetic predictions sealed their fates. Instead, they always believed that it was possible for intervening historical contingencies — especially the contingency of prayer — to have a significant effect on the ways that prophecies were fulfilled.

Twofold Reaction

The "Who knows?" reaction leads us to a broader understanding of the goal of Old Testament prophecy. The prophets expected and hoped for a two-fold reaction to their predictions. On the one hand, the prophets knew that there was one way to ensure that a threatened judgment would take place, if not grow worse. This way was to ignore the warning of a prediction and to remain in rebellion against God. At the same time, when prophets announced that God had decided to send a covenant judgment against his people, they wanted the people to turn to God in hopes that the judgment might be removed. Repentance and trust in Yahweh was the only hope for avoiding the judgment of God. On the other side, when prophets gave oracles of blessing, they also wanted to incite reactions from their readers. They could be sure that flagrant rebellion against God

might remove the predicted blessing and replace it with judgment, but continued faithful living would bring the promised blessing for sure.

Put simply, the prophets gave their predictions of judgment and blessings to encourage their listeners to seek to avoid judgment and to accelerate the blessings of God by their actions. In this way, the goal of prophetic predictions was not primarily to prognosticate, but to activate the people of God in the service of the Lord.

CONCLUSION

So it is that we have seen four topics in this lesson on the purpose of predictions. First, we touched on divine sovereignty over history, then predictions and contingencies, third, we saw the certainty of predictions and then finally, the goals of predictions. The concepts we've touched on in this lesson are absolutely essential for understanding Old Testament prophecy. Old Testament prophets were not trying to talk about history in advance so that people could simply learn what was going to happen in the future. They were activating people to seek the mercy of God so they could avoid judgment and find the blessings of God. As we read Old Testament prophecy, we must be activated to seek the blessing of God and to avoid his judgment as well.

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He Gave Us Prophets

LESSON
SEVEN

The Purpose of
Predictions
Faculty Forum



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He Gave Us Prophets

Lesson Seven: The Purpose of Predictions

Faculty Forum

With

Andrew Abernethy, Ph.D.
Dr. Peter Chow
Rev. Larry Cockrell
Rev. Sherif Gendy
Dr. Mark Gignilliat
Rev. Michael J. Glodo
Dr. J. Scott Horrell
Dr. Craig S. Keener
Dr. Glenn R. Kreider
Dr. Robert G. Lister

Dr. Robert K. MacEwen
Dr. Chip McDaniel
Dr. Josh Moody
Dr. Jeffery Moore
Dr. Miguel Nuñez
Dr. John Oswalt
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Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.
Prof. Brandon P. Robbins
Dr. Mike Ross

Dr. Philip Ryken
Dr. Tim Sansbury
Dr. Glen G. Scorgie
Rev. George Shamblin
Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry
Dr. K. Erik Thoennes
Dr. Carl R. Trueman
Dr. Carey Vinzant
Dr. Sanders L. Willson

Question 1:

What is God's immutability?

Dr. Glenn R. Kreider

By “immutability” we mean that God is not mutable. We mean that God does not change, that his immutability is a reference to his unchanging nature, his unchanging character. He is always loving. He is always merciful. He is always holy. He is always just. Immutability is sometimes misunderstood — to deny that God changes in his way of dealing with people, that there is a static way that God relates to people. But when the Scripture talks about us, in Ephesians, being “by nature children of wrath,” but now, because of the redemptive work of Christ, we are God’s friends, we are in a relationship with him in no way to undermine that God does not change in who he is, but he does change, by virtue of his own action on our behalf, change in his relationship to us.

Dr. Glen G. Scorgie

One of the many significant attributes of God, the Triune God, is immutability. That’s the term that you’ll find in many theology texts. Immutability might be translated “unchanging.” And that’s really wonderful news because we are so aware of the impermanence and the transience of just about everything in our lives, in the world, in our relationships, and even in our own fleeting lives. I think of that descriptor of God as the still point in a turning universe. What is there that draws our restless souls to a vision of a God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever? I think it’s this profound psychological and spiritual need we all have for that which is rock solid, that which is trustworthy, that which can function as an anchor for the soul when the mountains shake and everything appears to be falling into the sea. That’s a legitimate human need. When it’s not found in God, that need can drive us to addictions and all sorts of pathologies, and a kind of emotional infantilism that makes us less than

adults. But when it's anchored in God, when it's rightly centered in God, we become people of strength. We find our strength in this immutable God. Now in the history of Christian theology, however, there was an unfortunate appropriation early on of some platonic notions of God's immutability that implied that God was serenely detached and unaffected by the problems and struggles of his creatures and could not be touched in any way by what was going on in our chaotic existence. And so, this alien platonic notion of God's impassability effectively distanced God, at least in our perceptions of him, made him a cool and more philosophical essence than the dynamic, impassioned, personal God of Scripture. So, I think it's very important that we affirm that constancy of character and that firmness of resolve that immutability truly represents. The God who begins a good work and brings it to completion, that's the God we're talking about. But the immutable God is God the Father who is not untouched by the suffering and neediness of people, who is not unresponsive to their prayers. This God is an interactive, relational God whose stability of character and purpose is something we worship and adore.

Dr. J. Scott Horrell

When we say God is immutable, we mean he does not change. Of course, that's applied to Jesus Christ, "the same yesterday, today ... forever." But what doesn't change? The eternal Son assumed a human nature. Is that God changing? Theologians have always said, "No, that's not what we mean by immutability." Immutability means the attributes of God — again, that "Godness" of God does not change — so that the eternal Son would assume a human nature does not alter his divine nature. That's what does not change, and so with the Spirit, and so with the Father.

Dr. Jeffery Moore

Among the different attributes of God that we talk about, there's one called immutability, from the Latin that means he's not changing. He doesn't mutate, I guess is how we would hear that in English. God doesn't change, and that comes specifically straight from the Bible in many places, but most obviously, "Jesus Christ the same yesterday ... today, and for ever." The Bible is clear that God doesn't change, and yet it does describe things that look like change. For example ... the fact that the Bible talks about God changing his mind doesn't contradict God not changing ... but the important thing there is that the way that God relates to us doesn't change, therefore, I can count on that consistency. God doesn't, for example, when we're talking about God's law, the Bible doesn't indicate that God, *over time*, gets a little softer, you know. God doesn't lower his standards, you know. It isn't like he's looked at the human race for thousands of years now and said, "Well, you know, I knew they weren't perfect, but now I see how really imperfect they are, so they don't have to live up to the same standards." Those things never change. What God told Moses on Mount Sinai and what God has revealed throughout the Scriptures, still the same. We are held to the same standard, which would be very frightening if it were not for the fact that the gospel message doesn't change either, that God has always loved his creation and, specifically, very purposefully loved human beings enough that he came into the world to make a difference in our lives, to change it so that we wouldn't be consigned to hell forever, but could live with him in heaven forever. So, when the

Bible talks about God not changing, it may be talking in a law term. So, you know, don't think that the standards are relaxed. But also, always, it comes back to, in the gospel, God does still love us. There's no point in my life where I can say God's love can't reach me here, God's love has now ended because of whatever it is that I've done. God's immutability is a warning to us on the one side and a great comfort to us on the other.

Question 2: **In what ways is God immutable?**

Dr. Miguel Nuñez, translation

God is immutable in his essence. God is immutable in his characteristics as God. When God speaks, that word is immutable. When God is powerful, that power is immutable. When we talk about God's wisdom, that wisdom is immutable precisely because it belongs to God, and God is perfect. God is eternal, the same from eternity to eternity. The attributes of God are all immutable. When we think of a mutable or changeable being, we are no longer thinking about the Creator. We are no longer thinking about God. We are thinking of a creature. The creature is the one who changes, changes when she gets old, changes because he is not perfect, changes because we can improve. When we exist or believe or think something, since we are creatures, we can improve in the future, and therefore, change to improve. But God is perfect. He does not need to improve. He cannot improve. It is not only that he is immutable. He cannot change because, by virtue of being God, he is a perfect being in himself, independent of everything, not dependent on anybody. Nothing affects him. Nothing transforms him. Nothing changes him. He does not age. He exists outside of time and space. He is a being without comparison, set apart, and therefore, we can only talk about the immutability of God. So, regarding the question: How is God immutable? In every way that we can think of God, God is immutable. His decrees are immutable. His word is immutable. His essence, as we said, is immutable. His Spirit is immutable because he is God, and God by definition is immutable.

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

To say that God's immutable means that he's unchanging in his being, perfections, purposes and promises. So, his being — his nature, his essence; his perfections — the degree to which he possesses those characteristics; his purposes — what he has determined to do; and his promises — what he's told us he'll do. So, God's unchanging in those ways. That's not to say that God doesn't relate to us in a dynamic, relational, personal way. So, he listens to our prayers. He grieves over our sin. He delights in our faithfulness. And so, it's been said that God is essentially immutable, but relationally mutable. There's a degree to which he adapts what he's doing to our relationship with him, while at the same time maintaining his essential attributes.

Dr. Robert G. Lister

God's immutable in his essence and in his character. So, as God, he's fundamentally unchanging. He's fundamentally self-sufficient. He's fundamentally not dependent on his creation. In his character, he's fundamentally faithful; he's fundamentally committed to keeping his promises. So we can rely on him in those capacities.

Because God is changeless in his essence and changeless in his character, we can also be confident that, in keeping those promises that he has pledged himself to keep, God will change in relationship to his creatures in ways that are appropriate... When a sinner lays hold of the promise of salvation, it's not just a change on the part of the sinner, but God changes in relationship to the sinner from a status of wrath and judgment to a status of peace and reconciliation. Now, God's keeping that promise, which involves changing in relationship to the sinner, is predicated or based on the very fact that God is changeless in his character and his essence. It is the fact that God is reliable in his promise-keeping yesterday, today, and tomorrow that a sinner can know that on any day he or she repents, that promise stands for him or her and that God will change in his disposition from wrath to reconciliation.

Question 3:**Why must God's eternal plan be immutable?****Dr. Carl R. Trueman**

God's eternal plan must be immutable for a number of reasons. One, God himself is eternal and unchanging, and therefore, any plan that arises out of his nature must also partake of being unchangeable. Secondly, the prophecies of the Old Testament. God cannot deliver on his promises if he doesn't already know and control the way that history is flowing. If God changes his mind, then his promises in the Old Testament are hollow promises. Thirdly, that leads to a distinct pastoral point. The immutability of God and the immutability of God's purposes is a vital pastoral doctrine because it's only if we know that God's plan is absolutely reliable, it's only if we know that God does not change, that he will always fight for his people, that he will always fulfill his promises for his people, it's only if we know that, that we can actually preach the gospel with confidence or apply it from one believer to another. So, I would say for biblical, theological and pastoral reasons, God's plan must be immutable.

Dr. Carey Vinzant

God being changeless in the Old Testament is not about God being ontologically static. It's about God's faithfulness as a person; it's about God's trustworthiness in delivering on his promises to his people. So, I think the point when we talk about God's plan being immutable, God's eternal plan being immutable ... is that we are saying that God is committed to doing what is best, as he knows it, for everything including his people that he has made. And because he is the Maker and he is the overseer of history, things will work out the way he has designed them to work out, but that does not necessitate a sort of micro-managerial view of providence.

Rev. Larry Cockrell

God's eternal plan must also be immutable because God is immutable, meaning that he is unchanging. God being immutable says to us that he's unlike us... And since he is unchangeable, everything that emanates from him as it relates to his eternal plan, has to also be unchangeable. What God has decreed before the foundations of the world has to be unchangeable as well. If not, then that tells me that God has to adjust his plan and that speaks, then, to the fact that ... he may not be all-knowing — the fact that he was not able, from the offset to ascertain or determine what exactly would occur — and so then that would go against what we have learned in Scripture about him having foreknowledge, having predestined, predetermined things to take place in that respect there. And so, we would know that even before Adam and Eve's sin in the garden, Christ had already, before the foundations of the earth, had become the Passover Lamb who ultimately would take care, who would atone for sin, as such. And so that tells me that God's plan, because of who he is, is unchangeable as well, and his eternal will is being accomplished. When I look at human history, and I like to say that all human history serves God's purpose. You know, we like to think that man is impacting human history, and yes, to an extent they are, but they are impacting it under the auspices and the supervision of God himself.

Question 4:**What do theologians mean by the providence of God?****Dr. Carey Vinzant**

Very simply, the providence of God means that God is not just omnipresent. He is omnipresent and up to something. The doctrine of providence is the idea that God is at work in history in ways that are... in subtle ways. So, you have the sense... You know, one of the major devices in theater is the idea of *Deus ex machina*, the idea that things are going along in logical mechanistic fashion, and then there's a huge plot twist at the end where the gods intervene and bring the story to an unexpected resolution. Well, the whole point of the doctrine of providence is that God is never "*ex machina*." He is never absent from events. Events are always happening in his presence and under his hand, under his guidance.

Prof. Brandon P. Robbins

In today's society, or in Christian circles today, there are probably two prevailing views of God's providence. I hold to the circle that sees God's providence as — since God has foreordained all things to come to pass — his continual engagement and governing of his creation by the power of his will. Another competing view that is very popular for some today comes from middle knowledge or Molinism, believing that God is a God that knows all possible contingencies, knows all possible actions that individuals would do given a certain state of affairs, and then God literally changes in some sense to organize and govern things in a way that does not, in any way, interrupt the libertarian free will of individuals... This view tries to make a strong case very often, but it seems so complex. It seems hard for me to believe that

people like the apostle Paul and the writings of Scripture, had such a complex conception of providence in mind whenever they were speaking of the God of the Bible. A more simplistic answer — that God simply governs by the power of his will — seems to be the one that's most consistent, that we find in Scripture.

Dr. Carl R. Trueman

Theologians use the term “providence of God” to speak of the way in which God guides all things towards their end. Essentially, it means that nothing happens without God willing it to happen, and so everything is ultimately fitted into this great jigsaw, if you like, or this great pattern that conforms with God's plan for the universe.

Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry

Well, when we talk about the providence of God, what we're talking about is God's ongoing care for his creation and all his creatures. We don't just believe that God created the world and kind of wandered off to do something else. No, God continues to sustain the world by his word of power. Through his Word, through his Spirit, God continues to sustain the world. So, we think about God providing what we need: food, water, air, all those things we take for granted, God's providing them. That's why it's important we say our thanks to God. We say grace at meals and offer him praise and thanksgiving. Every good gift we got from the Father above. So, we need to remember he gives us everything we need. He is the governor. He's actually overseeing all events, even historical events, sometimes that seem wild, out of control, but God is omnipotent above all these things, guiding them, allowing things to happen that we may be mystified by, but we believe God is still in charge and guiding them to his own outcome. But also, if you like, particularly providing for us and for our salvation, helping us to realize our need for his gracious restorative work, our rebuilding work, and that he will one day take us to that new heavens and new earth if we put our faith in him, repent, be baptized. We're following him to this new kingdom. What we're going to see there is the fullness of God's providential care when he does, as the great heavenly Father who loves us so much, provides us every good gift that we need to sustain us in the work he's given us to do.

Dr. Sanders L. Willson

Well, the word “providence” comes from a Latin word — *providio*, which means, “to see ahead” — but in theology, it means more than just seeing ahead. It means to ordain and govern everything that's occurring in history. So, when we talk about the decree of God from all eternity, it usually breaks out into two categories: creation and providence. So, God has made all things, and then he sustains and governs all things, and it includes everything. Every blade of grass, every star, every meteor, everything that ever happened in space and time, God is sovereignly in control of it, and he does it according to his own wise, loving counsel.

Question 5: **What is divine foreknowledge?**

Dr. Philip Ryken

Part of the doctrine of the sovereignty of God is God's foreknowledge, his knowledge of things in advance before they even happen. And this is one of the great mysteries of the character of God. To me this is one of the things that really causes us to worship God for who he is, to realize here's a God who knows the end from the beginning. But when we use the term "foreknowledge" in its biblical sense, it's not just that God knows in advance what's going to happen, but he actually has an intention and a purpose. And foreknowledge, typically in the Bible, is used in the context of our salvation. Who are the people that God foreknows? It's the people that he has a saving plan, that he would redeem us in Jesus Christ. And so, the doctrine of the foreknowledge of God, I think, is a doctrine that leads to worship just because it shows how amazing the mind of God is, but it's also a doctrine that leads to humility and gratitude, that God has a loving purpose for us in Jesus Christ that goes back before the beginning of time.

Dr. Josh Moody

When we talk about God foreknowing, or the divine foreknowledge, we are discussing two elements primarily. One would be what the word itself means. So, what we're saying is God has foreknown, that is, he has known beforehand, and we are saying that God knows everything. Now, biblically, we not only saying that he foreknows everything. I would argue we're also saying that he is in control of everything, past present and future as the sovereign Lord over every aspect. Not a sparrow falls to the ground but that he knows it, as Jesus put it. And so, he is completely in control. So, he certainly foreknows. He not only foreknows, he's in control of everything. That is part of what we're saying when we talk about his foreknowledge. And there are different ways that Christians have articulated this, and some Christians describe this in more definitive ways than others, but that's one aspect that we're talking about. The other aspect we're talking about is the concept of knowledge as intimacy. So, when Paul talks about how God has "known" us, the knowledge that he seems to be referring to comes from the Old Testament understanding of knowledge, which is really intimacy, even husband and wife kind of intimacy. So we mustn't keep those two things at a distance from each other. And a lot of the controversy over exactly what does God foreknow, and how does he predict it, leaves aside the other element which is that God's foreknowledge of us is the knowledge of a lover. And it's that kind of knowledge — "since from before the creation of the world he has known us," and so we're not just a twinkle in his eye. We're his, if we're his child, we're his loved, known entity from eternity past to eternity future.

Rev. George Shamblin

In the New Testament, we come across different words that will describe what God does in the future, as we know it. One of those words is foreknowledge. There's no

question whatsoever that God foreknows everything that's going to happen in the future, because we know very clearly that God is omnipresent. There's no past to him, there's no present, there's no future. He's not bound by the bookends of time, as we know it. So, God definitely foreknows the future because he's already there. A lot of people confuse, though, foreknowledge with another word that is "predestine." Not only does God foreknow; the Scripture is going to tell us, in like Ephesians 1, that God predestines, we could even say "predetermines," things that happen in the future. I've had a friend of mine say before as an argument against predestination, he said, "Well, God foreknows who's going to choose him because he looks in the future. He sees that that person is going to choose him, and then he predestines that person." That argument always falls down. Number one, it makes salvation dependent upon the man. Number two, God can't be in the past, somehow jump to the future, return back to the past based on man. Not only does he foreknow, but again, the Bible says he predetermines back here everything that's going to happen. It's very interesting that I'll have a friend that will say God is in control of everything, and I say, "Oh, so you must be a Calvinist, you must believe in predestination?" And he says, "Well, he's in control of everything except who's saved and who's not saved." So, I say back to him, "Then you really don't believe God is completely in control of everything that happens." So foreknowledge, the New Testament absolutely talks about, but it's taken a step further. Not only does he foreknow, but he *predetermines*, predestines everything that will happen. Just in summary, God is never caught off guard. He foreknows, but he predestines as well.

Question 6:

How does Jeremiah 18 teach that God allows for human contingencies to alter the outcomes of prophetic predictions?

Dr. Mike Ross

In Jeremiah 18 God sets forth an example, an illustration of a potter and his pottery to show that the decisions of human beings, and even nations, can affect the work of God and his intentions in their lives... The number one rule of life — even though it may not be stated this bluntly, it's implicit in everything that God writes — is simply this, that if we obey God, we'll be blessed; if we don't, then there are dire consequences to be paid. One of the tensions in our theology is between the sovereignty of God and the will of mankind. Pharaoh is used both in the book of Exodus and in the book of Romans as the classic illustration. The Bible says repeatedly in Exodus that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, and then it turns right around and says *Pharaoh* hardened his heart. I think there's, I may be wrong on the number, but there's like eighteen references to that and nine times it says Pharaoh hardened his heart; nine times it says God hardened Pharaoh's heart. And both are true. We make decisions. These decisions have consequences. And God, who intends to do certain things, will punish us if we continue to ignore his word and to disobey him, but if we repent, Ezekiel says, God takes no delight in the destruction of the wicked but desires that they repent and live. So, when an individual, or a church, or a

nation hears the warnings of God's prophets — they hear the gospel, their consciences convict them, and they turn from their wicked ways and begin to pursue the Lord — God is prone to stay his judgments and to reward them instead of punishing them. This is the truth behind all great preaching. Preachers assume that people who are moving away from God can at any time, with the grace of God, turn and come back to the Lord and repent and be saved. They assume that nations can repent and turn back to the Lord and experience revival; the churches can change and experience reformation; that whole nations and people groups can turn back to the Lord and experience some spiritual restoration. So, Jeremiah 18 is the classic proof text, so to speak, that when any people — including a large group of people, a nation — turns back to the Lord, his original intentions to them will be turned to blessing. And, of course, the reverse is true. If a nation is headed down the road of following God and turns into wickedness, then his intentions to bless them would be turned into intentions to discipline them and judge them unless they repent. This is simply the law of reciprocity that Jesus talks about all the time that we reap what we sow and that God responds to our will as much as we respond to his.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Jeremiah 18 is a very important chapter for understanding how God gives prophecies and then fulfills them, but it's not unique. There are many, many passages in the Bible that reveal the same basic principles about how prophecy is fulfilled. And one of the first things we have to say about the way that prophecies are fulfilled is this: God knows everything, and God is never surprised by any reaction anyone ever has to any prophecy that his prophets give. So, God is not making predictions through his prophets and then going, "Whoops, can't do that. I didn't realize they would react in that way." So don't ever think that Jeremiah 18 is teaching that the contingencies that are associated with a prophecy surprise God. They don't surprise him at all. On the contrary, when God gives prophecies through his prophets, he gives them within a context, a framework of understanding, and this framework surrounds every prophetic word. And the framework that surrounds every prophetic word is his covenants... And we know that all of God's covenants have certain elements or certain dynamics to them of God's mercy or God's benevolences and the requirement of loyalty, and that there will be consequences as God wants to give those consequences of blessings and curses for people when they're loyal and when they're disloyal to him. And knowing that that's the basic framework that surrounds every single prediction that's ever given in the Bible, it should not surprise us at all that there are contingencies that are associated with predictions. God does not always have to say those conditions, those contingencies, because they've already been said in his covenants. And it would be as if you would expect a parent to tell a child every single time they said, "I'm going to do something," to list off all the contingencies that might avert what they're going to do. You imagine, can't you, a four-year-old child who's told Sunday coming out of church, "We're going to get some ice cream and go to the park." Well, on the way out of church maybe the mother falls down and breaks her leg, and so they have to run off to the hospital. And that evening when they get home the four-year-old looks at her Daddy and says, "Daddy, we didn't get ice cream today." And he says, "Well, of course not. We took your mother to the hospital." And the little girl looks at

him and says, “But you promised.” Well, what’s the problem with the little girl? It’s not that Daddy was lying to her because Daddy knew this long list of things that could happen, and we wouldn’t go get ice cream and go to the park if these long lists of things happened, and one of those was if your mother falls down and breaks her leg. But the four-year-old didn’t know that yet. She wasn’t mature enough to understand that. And in some respects, when Christians read prophecies they forget the lesson, the understanding that an adult has when words like those are given. There are always implicit conditions that are associated with predictions in the Bible. And those implicit conditions are given to us by other parts of the Bible. When Jonah spoke to Nineveh, and he said, “Forty days hence and Nineveh will be destroyed,” he did not list off all the conditions that might turn that around. But in chapter 4, when Jonah is confronted by God and he says, “Why are you upset?” he says to God, “I knew you would do this because you’re the kind of God who threatens to destroy a city, and if they repent then you don’t do it.” And that’s why Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh because he did not want the possibility of Nineveh repenting. Well, see, everybody in biblical days understood that the covenant surrounds every single prediction that a prophet makes, and that means that, in one way or another, the way people respond to a prophecy can affect, if God wants it to, can affect the way the prophecy will be fulfilled.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

In some instances we may see Old Testament prophets predict things that end up not happening, *ever*. And you might wonder, well, what happened to the word of God in those situations? But Jeremiah 18 gives us some really important insight into how historical contingencies interact with what the prophets predict, because if you look at the predictions of the prophets, you generally see three types of predictions. One are predictions with conditions attached: “If you don’t do this,” — i.e., repent and turn back to me — “this will happen.” And so it’s clear in those cases, if the people repent and turn back to the Lord, the bad thing is not going to happen. You see a second category of prophecies which says, “This is going to happen and nothing’s going to change that.” In fact, a lot of the message of Jeremiah is exactly that — that exile is coming, and the way forward is to accept that and look for God’s purposes in that. But there’s a third kind of prediction that Jeremiah 18 gives us insight into, and that is, if you look at what Jeremiah is saying there, you see that even when conditionality is not explicit, it is often implicit. So, for instance, if you’re standing in the middle of the road and I see a bus coming. I say, “You’re going to get killed!” And you look, and you see the bus, and you run out of the road, and you didn’t get killed. Well, am I a false prophet if I did that? There was an implicit condition that if you jump out of the way, you won’t get killed. And so, there are those cases where there are predictions where the conditionality is implicit, not explicit, and when God’s people respond in the right way, then the prediction doesn’t happen, which is just a natural kind of way that we speak. And how much more so is it a way that God might speak? And he does.

Question 7:

Why is it that some prophecies in Scripture don't come to pass as predicted?

Rev. Sherif Gendy, translation

Some prophecies in Scripture don't come to pass as predicted because prophecies are conditional, with either explicit or implicit conditions. So, the response of the people towards these conditions determines the way in which the prophecy is fulfilled. Let's take an example of explicit conditions. In Isaiah 1:18-20, the prophet says,

Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword (Isaiah 1:18-20).

Here, we see very explicit conditions. "If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land." There will be blessings. But if you refuse, there will be punishment — "you shall be eaten by the sword." This is an example of a prophecy with conditions based on obedience or disobedience that will bring judgment. We also find an example of implicit conditions in Jeremiah 7:5-7, where the prophet says,

For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever (Jeremiah 7:5-7).

The conditions listed here include not oppressing "the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow." If these conditions are fulfilled, the promise is to let them dwell in that place, in the land that God gave to their fathers. The implicit condition here is that if they *do* oppress the sojourner, the fatherless and the widow, if they act on the contrary, the prophecy will not be fulfilled. He will not let them dwell in the land that he promised to their fathers. So, the way the people respond to the explicit and implicit conditions in the prophecies determines the way in which a prophecy will be fulfilled, according to its conditions.

Dr. Robert G. Lister

There's a principle that's announced to us in Jeremiah 18 whereby God effectively says, "If I threaten judgment on a nation or a people, and they repent, I will withhold the judgment that I intended to do to them." And the flip side is stated as well. "If I promise blessing on a people or king or a nation, and they cease obeying my commands, then I will bring judgment where I had formerly promised blessing." And this principle then seems to get worked out in such a way that this condition is

explicitly stated here, and apparently is carried out in other passages in ways that are implicit, specifically in contexts where God is threatening judgment or promising blessing. And probably the classic example is in the book of Jonah, where God sends Jonah to announce judgment on the people of Nineveh. Jonah does this, and the people of Nineveh repent, invoking this criterion of human repentance, which it seems is what God was trying to stir up in their hearts in the first place.

Dr. Tim Sansbury

When we go to Scripture, and we have a high view of Scripture, and we have a high expectation of the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture, it can be interesting to puzzle over what appear to be prophecies that don't come true, as they've been predicted... In Jeremiah, God says that he has the right, that he withholds the privilege to say one thing — for example, to promise great blessings — but if the people do not obey, and if they turn away from him, that despite the fact that he has said, “I will bless you,” that he could curse them and that he could bring harm. Meanwhile, he also says, “I could also say there will be great harm, and there will be curses in the covenant, but if the people turn towards me and turn away from their sin, I reserve the right,” — so to speak — “not to cause those prophecies to be fulfilled.” If the intent of Scripture, primarily and above all, in prophecy was to tell us the future, then God would not, could not, say those things about his own prophecies. But he does say that, because what he does want in prophecy is to cause change in his people and to bring them back to him.

Question 8:

What do we learn about the influence of human reactions to predictions in the story of Jonah?

Dr. Peter Chow, translation

Some prophecies don't foretell events that must happen, but instead are conditional, such as Jonah's prediction that Nineveh would be judged. God allowed the Ninevites to repent, because if they repented, then his judgment wouldn't fall on them. So, when Jonah proclaimed that Nineveh would fall, the people of Nineveh repented. Actually, the prophet Jonah wasn't too happy about this. He'd hoped that Nineveh would be judged, but because they repented, God didn't judge them. This is one of the examples where the prophecy stated the condition that failure to repent would result in judgment, and thus repentance meant no judgment.

Dr. Robert G. Lister

There is an interesting class of prophecies in Scripture that apparently are not fulfilled, or don't come to pass... Now, the classic example of this is in the book of Jonah, where Jonah goes to the city of Nineveh, when he finally gets there, and says, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown,” in fulfillment of God's command to him to go and warn of this coming judgment, coming condemnation on Nineveh. The people of Nineveh are not told that if they repent they will be spared. The king

and the people surmise that perhaps this might be the case, and they decide to call a fast and — on the hope that if they repent, that God may relent of the judgment he intended to do to them — they find, in fact, that that is what happens... What I think we actually see is that God's intention is accomplished. God intends, by way of the word of warning through Jonah, to stir up the repentance of the Ninevites so that he may treat them in kind with mercy instead of judgment. It is interesting that in the case of the book of Jonah, God does not just rain fire from heaven. He could. They're already wicked. They're already guilty. They're already deserving of judgment. So, when Jonah shows up and says, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh will be overthrown," he attaches a time period. And it's interesting to ask the question: Why is there a time period between the announcement of God's judgment and the foretold experience of God's judgment? It seems to me that that's an indicator that God's purpose here is to give them an opportunity to repent. He initiates the relationship. He initiates the contact by issuing the word of warning so that there will be an opportunity to repent, when he could have just rained fire had he so chosen. He didn't. His desire was to stir up their repentance. It's also interesting to see Jonah's response to what happens to the Ninevites in chapter 4 of the book of Jonah. After the people repent, and God relents from his fierce anger, Jonah says effectively, "I knew this is what you were going to do. This is why I fled to Tarshish in the first place, because I knew what kind of God you are — slow to anger, abounding in compassion, steadfast in love. Basically, you love to forgive sinners. That's why I left in the first place." Not because God told him, "I'm sending you there to preach this message with the result that they will repent," but God told him, "Go and preach judgment," and Jonah knew the character of God. So Jonah, it seems, knows that God's intention in this instance is to stir up their repentance, which means that God's word accomplishes what it was intended to accomplish.

If I could use an analogy, when I warn my children, my young children, not to play in the street, and I threaten them with judgment, so to speak, if they disobey that command, my purpose in issuing that warning is not done in hopes that they will disobey my command and play in the street, and then I will have the opportunity to punish them. That's not my desire. My desire in stating the warning is to establish the boundary of prohibition so that they will heed my call and not do what I have prohibited in that instance. In a similar fashion, God's taking the initiative with these people who, like all of the rest of us don't deserve it, is done so for the purpose of stirring up their repentance so he may relate to them in kind. It's not the only kind of prophecy that there is. There are prophesies of unilateral direct fulfillment by God, and prophesies where God says he's going to directly do something through this or that person, and it is unconditionally fulfilled. But there are some examples of prophesies, like this one, where it seems that the condition attaches, and the point of the threat of judgment or the promise of blessing hinges on either continued obedience on the one hand, or repentance on the other.

Rev. Sherif Gendy, translation

The Lord, in general terms, declares these words in Jeremiah 18:7-10:

If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it (Jeremiah 18:7-10).

The Lord here sets a general principle that he could give promises or prophecies of goodness or benevolences to a certain nation. But if this nation does not submit to the Lord and does not live according to his laws and commandments, the Lord will not fulfill the promise or the prophecy he said, and he will not do them good. And on the other hand, if he prophesied to destroy certain people, and this people returned and repented, the prophecy of destruction and devastation would not be fulfilled.

One of the clearest examples for that is Jonah. When Jonah went to Nineveh, the prophecy was, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” in 3:4. We already know from the book of Jonah that the city was not overthrown after the forty days, because a contingent event happened after Jonah said the prophecy. The people repented and returned to the Lord. The prophecy was not fulfilled in Jonah’s days. It was postponed and fulfilled in Nahum’s days, who came and declared the destruction of Nineveh. It was not fulfilled directly in the timeframe or the era Jonah mentioned. Jonah himself told us in 4:2 that he knew that if the people repented, the Lord would be gracious and merciful, forgiving iniquity and transgression. Therefore, Old Testament prophecies have implicit conditions, if not explicit. If the people interacted positively with the prophecy through obedience, the destruction that the prophecy might have indicated would not happen, and vice versa. If the people negatively interacted through rebellion and disobedience, the good that the Lord had previously promised would not happen.

Question 9:**Why does God sometimes put conditions on his prophecies?****Dr. Mark Gignilliat**

God puts conditions on his prophecies in the Prophets, I think, in some sense to remind us that God’s interaction with his people is a lived and dynamic interaction. It’s a relationship. It’s a covenant. It’s a covenant that he’s determined to enter into with people. And so, when God makes a prophecy or gives a prophetic announcement against his people, he will put conditions into that, at times, to provide again that dynamic relationship that gives room for real response in time and space. And those responses matter. And sometimes these qualifications that are made are qualifications

that are reminders — “I’ve claimed you; you’re mine. Come back to me.” You see this throughout Jeremiah’s prophecy from beginning to end. “Why is this bad thing happening to us?” they ask in Jeremiah in his book, and the answer is “Because God has claimed you and you’ve turned away from him.” So these conditions are given to the people to remind them of their covenantal relationship with God and their commitment to that. And sometimes, these qualifications are stated in very clear ways, and sometimes they’re unstated qualifications. I think the most famous one is in Jonah. Jonah gives us the smallest sermon in history. “Forty days and Nineveh is destroyed!” But then ... the pagans turn and God relents from his judgment. And I think what you see there is a prophetic statement that has an unstated qualification. And when you get into Jonah 4, you can see that Jonah’s not real happy about the fact that God pulled back, he relented from his destruction toward the Ninevites. And the reason why Jonah was angry — and I think this gets at the heart of these prophetic qualifications — the reason why Jonah was so angry was because he knew the character of God. God’s gracious — “You’re compassionate; I knew that you were quick to forgive, and you’re doing it with the wrong people” — in the book of Jonah. So, these qualifications that come into the prophetic announcements are rooted in a covenantal relationship with God and his people.

Andrew Abernethy, Ph.D.

It’s common in the prophecies in the Old Testament for God to attach conditions to them, such as, “If you don’t repent you are going to experience judgment.” A wonderful kind of glimpse at this way that God works with his prophecies is in Jeremiah 18 where you have this symbolic experience where Jeremiah has been told to go down to the potter’s house, and he’s observing a potter forming clay, and then all of a sudden the clay becomes warped and the potter starts over again. And God draws upon that to give a teaching lesson for a prophecy that Jeremiah is supposed to give, which is that if Israel is told that if they don’t repent that they’re going to experience judgment. God could change that, because if they do repent, God will change his plan for judgment, if you will, of destroying the pot and remake it now into, Israel, into a restored community. But on the flipside God says, “If I’ve promised to bring good to you, but you instead start doing evil,” he could change his mind too, and he could bring judgment. So, this is a typical way that prophecy works, where God is framing his call for repentance in light of prospective judgment, but also warning those who think they’re destined for a good life that judgment could meet them too if they are not righteous.

Dr. Sanders L. Willson

It seems sometimes that he makes a statement that something’s going to happen in judgment, and then it doesn’t because the parties repent. And then it looks as though God himself repents. In fact, the same word is used about God that is used of sinners, and we go, “I thought God never changed his mind.” Well, eternally he doesn’t change his mind. He decrees whatsoever comes to pass from all eternity. However, in space and time God works with us, and it’s not as though he doesn’t know ahead of time, nor is it that he doesn’t ordain things ahead of time, but he’s still interacting. We’re theists. We believe that God is in personal relationship with his creation, and

he's gracious. So, he does put conditions, either explicitly or implicitly, on prophecies because he desires that none should perish. I mean, there's a compassion about God that is beyond our imagination, and he delights to see one sinner repent, so his judgments are actually acts of grace toward us, or his warnings are acts of grace toward us. And I think God really does delight to change the way that he says something to us because he's also empowered us to repent.

Question 10:

What was the main purpose of biblical prophecy?

Dr. Chip McDaniel

When we think of prophecy, the purpose of prophecy in the Bible, we tend to think of prediction. The prophets are here to tell us things that are going to happen in the future. But that was never the intent of the biblical prophet. The biblical prophet was sent to God's people to encourage and to exhort — to encourage that God was in control and that he would take care of things as long as they were obedient, but then also, to exhort the people to obey this God that was providing them with such an abundant life. We have this in the New Testament as well. In the book of Thessalonians he says, "Look, Christ is coming back. He's going to wrap things up. God is in control. Don't worry about things as though they're going to continue the way they are because the Lord will return." But then, there's also the exhortation: Work with your hands. Do your work. Provide for your family. And so we also see that there's this element of encouragement and exhortation. Only a small part of the purpose of the prophet was to predict the future, and that's divided into two forms, near prophecy and far prophecy. And according to Deuteronomy 18 and Deuteronomy 13, the prophet would predict near-term prophetic events, and if they came true then you would know that that was a prophet, and you could trust those prophecies that were further out, or you could believe the message that the prophet was saying. And so, when we think of prophecy, we mustn't think of people forecasting the future, but messengers who come from God as spokesmen for God to encourage the people, God is in control, he is in charge of things despite the way things look, and to exhort them to obey this God.

Dr. Greg Perry

Many people think that the main purpose of biblical prophecy is to make predictions, and we do see some predictions that God makes in Scripture, like that — "a virgin shall conceive and give birth to a child" — and this certainly demonstrates God's sovereignty over history that there can be a predictive element to many prophecies. But that's not the major role of prophecy. The main role of prophecy is that the prophet represents the covenant of God and calls God's people back to covenant faithfulness. We see this very clearly in a passage like Jeremiah 18 where you see this sort of futuristic element that God is going to bring about good things for the nation, unless they are wicked. And then God says, "If you're wicked, I am going to destroy and pull up things from you." And then he says, "I have plans for terrible things, but

if you repent, if you relent of your wicked ways, then I will bring good things to you. I will plant and build you up.” And so, what we see in Jeremiah 18 is this conditional element of biblical prophecy that is connected to the covenant of God, that God offers two paths to his people: as you obey there is a path of blessing in the future; with disobedience the expectation is that God would bring the sanctions of the covenant, the curses of the covenant against you. So, the prophet represents the covenant and calls God’s people to covenant faithfulness.

Dr. Robert K. MacEwen

Well, most biblical prophecy is in the Old Testament, and I really like what Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart said about that in the book *How to Read the Bible for all its Worth*, which is something along the lines of, “The main job and task of the Old Testament prophets was to enforce God’s covenant.” So they were taking the Pentateuch, the Torah, as their starting point. They would go back to that and say, you know, to the people they were talking to “today,” several centuries after Moses, how were they doing in obeying God’s laws and commandments? And most of the time they were not doing very well. So, what they were doing is reminding God’s people, “This is what God said to you through Moses. And this is what you’re supposed to do. You’re not doing it. And by the way, Moses also said these judgments would come upon you for your disobedience.” So, the prophets would remind them of what God had already written in the Pentateuch, warn them of judgment, and exhort them, and encourage them to repent. So, most of the time, the Old Testament prophets were most of all concerned with the situation that was facing them and God’s people in their own day, and only secondarily were they concerned with the future.

Dr. John Oswalt

Many people think that biblical prophecy is primarily for the prediction of the future, but that’s not correct. Prediction of the future is a significant part of it, but primarily, biblical prophecy is marked by the concern of the prophet for the moral nature of the people. And it’s in that context then that prediction comes. If the people will respond to God’s directions, then the future will be hopeful. If they will not respond, then the future will not be hopeful. So, the purpose of biblical prophecy is to call people back to faithful living for God.

Question 11:

Can some prophecies have implicit conditions that are never explicitly stated?

Dr. Craig S. Keener

Biblical prophecies are often conditional, even when those conditions aren’t stated. There are a number of examples of that in Scripture. For example, Elijah is told, and says to Ahab, you know, “You’re in big trouble. This judgment is coming in your time.” But then God later tells Elijah, “Well, Ahab has humbled himself. It’s not going to come in his time; it’s going to come in the time of his descendants” — 1

Kings 21. Also, the prophet Jeremiah says, the Lord tells him, “If I pronounce judgment against a nation, but they turn from their wickedness, then I’ll do good for them. And if I pronounce good on a people, and they turn from my way, then I’ll bring judgment on them.” Again, in Ezekiel 33, you have the same idea where God says he’s going to bring judgment, but he doesn’t really delight in the death of the one who dies. You know, if a person turns from their wickedness, then he’ll bless them. You have the same thing in the book of Jonah where Jonah says, “Forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” Nineveh repents, and Jonah is sorely disappointed.

Dr. Tim Sansbury

So we ask the question about whether a prophecy might have implicit conditions that aren’t expressed in the prophecy itself. In some ways it’s a funny question to ask because, especially as prophecies are uttered from within the covenant, the covenantal relationship between God and the people of Israel, there is an underlying level of implicit condition that is already there in what is being spoken. The prophecy comes out of it, arises consistent with, it’s part of the covenantal relationship. And there are conditions in the covenantal relationship. And so, even if God does not say in a particular place, “I will bless you in this way, so long as you keep my covenant,” if that last part is not included, it is included in the general understanding of prophecy’s operation within the covenant. It’s explicitly stated in Jeremiah 18, and Jeremiah 18 is meant to teach what is implicit in all prophecy everywhere throughout Scripture. So, again, it would almost be easier to say that apart from times when God might be giving prophecy to those outside of the covenantal relationship — in which case they might not have the full... they might not understand the covenants at all; they might not be aware of any conditions and any ways that things might be changed — that all prophecy that occurs to Israel from within the covenantal relationship always carries with it implicit conditions because it is a part and aspect of that covenantal relationship.

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He Gave Us Prophets

LESSON
EIGHT

UNFOLDING
ESCHATOLOGY



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He Gave Us Prophets

Lesson Eight

Unfolding Eschatology

INTRODUCTION

When I was growing up, my family would always go on vacations in the car, and we would have a clear destination in mind, and we'd reach that destination. But along the way, different things would happen that would unfold the plan. We'd stay in one place a little longer than expected, or we'd have a flat tire, something like that.

Well, similar things happen with Old Testament prophecy. God has a sovereign plan for all of human history, and that plan will reach its end, and every step along the way has been sovereignly planned by God. But at the same time we know that in his providence God watches to see how human beings will react to prophecy, and when they react one way he will respond in one way; when they react in another way he will respond in another way. And so what we find is that the destiny, or the *eschaton*, unfolds throughout the Bible. God reveals more and more of what he's going to do for his people as the Bible progresses.

We've entitled this lesson "Unfolding Eschatology" because we will see how the prophetic vision of the end of time, or of eschatology, developed through the various stages of prophecy. We'll look at four major steps in the unfolding disclosure of eschatology which we must always remember: first, Moses' eschatology; second, early prophetic eschatology; third, we'll take a look at later prophetic eschatology; and then fourth, we'll take a look at New Testament eschatology. Let's look first at the perspectives that come from Moses himself.

MOSAIC ESCHATOLOGY

Have you ever been in really hard times and the only thing that got you through was the belief that one day the hard times would be over? Well, in many respects, Moses gave that kind of perspective to Israel. He told Israel that hard times were coming, even in exile from the Land of Promise, but he also gave them the hope, an eschatological hope, that one day things would be much better. In order to understand Moses' perspectives, we've got to take a look at some of the basic dynamics of covenant that we've already seen in previous lessons: first, covenant cycles; and second, covenant culmination.

COVENANT CYCLES

You will recall that Moses understood that God would test the loyalty of his people and that his people would often fail. As a result, Moses taught that cycles of

judgment and blessing would characterize the relationship between God and his people. When God's people flagrantly rebelled against him, they experienced his judgment in war and in nature. When God's people were faithful to him, they experienced his blessing in war and in nature. This cyclical covenant pattern between blessing and judgment appears many times throughout the whole Old Testament.

COVENANT CULMINATION

Now eschatology in Moses' writings develops out of this basic pattern of blessing and judgment. According to Moses, the judgments and the blessings of the covenant would not continue in an eternal circle, never going anywhere or toward any goal. On the contrary, Moses saw a definite end, or *eschaton*, in the future. To understand how Moses taught a culmination to the covenant life, or an *eschaton*, we need to see three elements in his outlook on history: first, exile; second, repentance and forgiveness; and third, restoration from exile.

In the first place, Moses expected that judgments would increase as Israel went further and further away from God. This increase in judgment would culminate in the exile of Israel from the Promised Land. The people of God would suffer defeat in war, and the harmony of nature in the Promised Land would turn into the corruption of nature. The people of God would be scattered among the nations, and the Land of Promise would lie in ruins. Listen to the way Moses puts it in Deuteronomy 4:25-28:

After you have had children and grandchildren and have lived in the land a long time — if you then become corrupt and make any kind of idol, doing evil in the eyes of the Lord your God and provoking him to anger, I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you this day that you will quickly perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess. You will not live there long but will certainly be destroyed. The Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and only a few of you will survive among the nations to which the Lord will drive you. There you will worship man-made gods of wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or eat or smell (Deuteronomy 4:25-28).

We see here that Moses predicted that a terrible exile would take place, but as horrible as this exile would be, it was not the end of the history of God's covenant with Israel. Repentance and forgiveness could change the situation of exile. As Moses put it in 4:29:

But if from there you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul (Deuteronomy 4:29).

Once exile had occurred, the people of God could come to their senses, repent and then find forgiveness from God.

What would be the result of this repentance and forgiveness? In a word, it would be restoration from exile. Moses taught that God would have mercy on his people and

bring them back to the land to enjoy a permanent state of unimaginable covenant blessings. Listen to the way Moses described the culmination of covenant blessing in Deuteronomy 4:30-31:

When you are in distress and all these things have happened to you, then in latter days you will return to the Lord your God and obey him. For the Lord your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your forefathers, which he confirmed to them by oath (Deuteronomy 4:30-31).

In 4:30, Moses coined a technical term for this period of final restoration. He said that the restoration of Israel after the exile would take place in the “latter days.” The Hebrew behind this expression is *b’aharit hayyamim* (בְּאַחֲרֵי הַיָּמִים). In most cases this kind of terminology simply meant “the future” of some indefinite sort. But here, in Deuteronomy 4:30 we find the technical use of the terminology “the last days” or “the culmination of history.” This technical use appears in many places in the prophets, including Isaiah 2:2; Micah 4:1; and Hosea 3:5. In the New Testament, the same expression occurs in Acts 2:17; Hebrews 1:2; and James 5:3. In fact, it is this expression from which we get our theological term “eschatology” — the study of last things or last events.

We can summarize Moses’ eschatology in this way. Moses knew that Israel was going to fall into serious sin and receive an exile from the land. But once the people were out of the land and they repented of their sins, they would be forgiven by God. And then, in the latter days, or the *eschaton*, they would be brought back to the Land of Promise and receive tremendous blessings. This basic outlook of Moses provides a background for the entire history of prophetic expectations.

With Moses’ very simple eschatology in view, we’re now ready to see the eschatology of the early prophets of the Old Testament. How did the prophets before the exile to Babylon view the movement of history towards its culmination in the latter days?

EARLY PROPHETIC ESCHATOLOGY

Now in this lesson, when we speak of early prophetic expectations, we have in mind those prophets who ministered up to the time of Daniel. The prophets up to the time of Daniel had a basic eschatological perspective that looked very much like Moses’ own perspective. We will look at two aspects of early prophetic eschatology: first, the similarities to Moses; and second, the additions to Moses. Let’s look first at the similarities that early prophetic eschatology had with the basic patterns established by Moses.

SIMILARITIES TO MOSES

Moses presented a pattern of a national judgment leading to exile which would be followed by repentance leading to a great restoration. Old Testament prophets spent

much of their time warning of the coming exile. Again, following Moses, the prophets before Daniel never gave up hope that repentance and forgiveness would take place in the exile. In fact, the prophets believed that God would supernaturally renew the remnant of his people in exile and give them forgiveness. As Isaiah puts it in Isaiah 10:20:

In that day the remnant of Israel, the survivors of the house of Jacob, will no longer rely on him who struck them down but will truly rely on the Lord, the Holy One of Israel (Isaiah 10:20).

Jeremiah spoke similarly when he announced that the people who would be taken into exile would receive a new heart of faithfulness and obedience to God's law. In Jeremiah 31:33 we read these words about the exiles:

I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people (Jeremiah 31:33).

The early prophets expected a change of heart in those who were taken into exile.

But third, early Old Testament prophets also affirmed that the repentant remnant would be gathered back to the land of Israel for a great restoration. The words of Isaiah are to the point once again. In Isaiah 44:21-22 we read these words:

Remember these things, O Jacob, for you are my servant, O Israel. I have made you, you are my servant; O Israel, I will not forget you. I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you (Isaiah 44:21-22).

The early prophets made it very clear that the basic Mosaic eschatology was true. Israel was going into exile and repentance and forgiveness would lead to a restoration to the land. But the early prophets also added some special features to this basic Mosaic pattern.

ADDITIONS TO MOSES

Put simply, a major covenant event took place between Moses and the early prophets, and this covenant was, of course, the Royal Covenant made with David. As a result, the early prophets made three major additions to Moses' portrait of early eschatology, or end times. First, they had a focus on kingship; second, a focus on the temple; and third, a focus on gentile nations. Let's look first at the way the early prophets concerned themselves with kingship.

Kingship

On the one hand, unlike Moses, the early prophets did not merely say that the nation would suffer defeat and natural disasters. Because David's throne had become the

centerpiece of the life of God's people, according to these prophets, the judgment of God would include a desertion of the throne of David. For instance, we read about the judgment against David's throne when Isaiah rebuked king Hezekiah in Isaiah 39:5-7.

Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of the Lord Almighty: The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your fathers have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the Lord. And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon" (Isaiah 39:5-7).

The desertion of David's throne was one aspect of the exile that culminated the history of God's people.

Despite the tragedy of judgment against David's throne, the prophets also assured Israel that God was not finished with the throne of David. Instead, the prophets predicted that the restoration of Israel after the exile would include a restoration of the throne of David to great glory. Listen to the way Jeremiah described the restoration of David's throne in Jeremiah 23:5-6:

"The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days, Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord Our Righteousness'" (Jeremiah 23:5-6).

The promise of a righteous son of David became an essential ingredient in the portrait of the latter days of the restoration.

Not only did the early prophets concern themselves with David's throne, they also focused on the temple built by David's son, Solomon.

Temple

Many Israelites had wrongly believed that the temple of God in Jerusalem was inviolable. The prophets had to speak boldly about the temple of God in Jerusalem being destroyed. For instance, Jeremiah spoke strongly against the false prophets and priests who insisted that the temple would never be destroyed. In Jeremiah 7, the prophet warned the people not to believe this false teaching. In verse 4 we read these words:

Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!" (Jeremiah 7:4).

The true prophets of Yahweh uniformly announced that the temple of God would be destroyed at the time of exile.

Yet the prophets also promised that in the restoration period after the exile a glorious temple would be rebuilt. More than any other prophet Ezekiel focused on the rebuilding of this glorious temple in the restoration period. Chapters 40-48 of his book concentrate on this theme. God gave Ezekiel a special picture of the restoration temple and ordered the people to build it. Listen to the words of God to Ezekiel in Ezekiel 43:10-11:

Son of man, describe the temple to the people of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their sins. Let them consider the plan, and if they are ashamed of all they have done, make known to them the design of the temple... Write these down before them so that they may be faithful to its design and follow all its regulations (Ezekiel 43:10-11).

Early prophets added a concern for David's throne and the temple. But they also added a third concern which Moses did not address very clearly — they were concerned with the Gentile nations.

Gentiles

In the first place, the prophets saw very clearly that Israel's exile would mean victory for certain Gentile nations over the people of God. As we know, they predicted that the Assyrians and the Babylonians would conquer Israel and severely mistreat the people of God.

While victory was given to the Gentiles during Israel's exile, the early prophets also spelled out that this Gentile supremacy would not last forever. In the restoration from exile, God would strike out against the Gentiles who mistreated his people through the restored throne of David. God would defeat the Gentiles and give Israel great victory in a battle against the Gentiles. This theme appears in many ways throughout the prophets, but one of the most dramatic ways it comes to the foreground is in the technical expression the "day of the Lord," in Hebrew, *yom Yahweh* (יְהוָה יוֹם). The basic idea behind this phrase was that Yahweh was able to destroy all of his enemies in a single day, and for this reason, the "day of the Lord" was said to belong to him, much like victorious soldiers say even today as they go into battle, "The day is ours!"

This terminology is particularly powerful in the way it sets up a contrast between Israel's exile and Israel's restoration. Perhaps the best way to see this is to look at the way the prophet Joel uses the expression the "day of the Lord." The expression appears in Joel 1:15, 2:1, 2:11, 2:31, and 3:14. The first three references to the "day of the Lord" refer to God defeating Judah. The people of the covenant had become God's enemies because of their sins, and the "Lord's Day" was the time when he would destroy them and send them into exile.

But Joel also shifted the way he used this terminology in the second half of his book. He described another event as the "day of the Lord." This "day of the Lord" will take place when Israel is restored from exile. It will be God's defeat of the nations who oppressed the people of God. For example, in Joel 2:31-32 we read these words:

The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the Lord has said, among the survivors whom the Lord calls (Joel 2:31-32).

So we see that for Joel the “day of the Lord” not only referred to judgment against the people of God, but it also referred to a great battle that would take place as the people of God were restored to the land.

Before we leave the theme of Gentiles in Israel’s eschatology, we should mention one final element — the expansion of Israel through the ingrafting of Gentiles. When the “day of the Lord” comes against the Gentiles when Israel is restored, not all Gentiles will be destroyed. On the contrary, after the battle, many Gentiles will come to the people of God and join them in the worship of the one true and living God. As the prophet Isaiah put it in Isaiah 2:2-3:

In the last days the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, “Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths” (Isaiah 2:2-3).

This passage and a number of others point to the culmination of eschatological hopes in early Old Testament prophecy. The blessings of God would pour out on Israel, but these blessings would include the ingrafting of countless Gentiles into the true faith so that God’s covenant people will expand to cover the entire earth. This grand new heavens and new earth would be a world filled with the knowledge of God. Peace would come to the earth and all the peoples who remain will worship the true and living God.

So we see that the early prophets followed the basic pattern that Moses set forth. They believed that an exile was coming, but repentance and forgiveness would lead to the *eschaton*, or the great restoration. Now, to this basic pattern the prophets added several important themes: first, the centrality of David’s throne; second, the importance of the temple; and third, the very special role that Gentiles would play both in the exile of Israel and in the great restoration of God’s people.

We have seen the foundation of Mosaic eschatology and the similarities and modifications of early prophetic eschatology. Now we’re in a position to explore the developments of later prophetic eschatology.

LATER PROPHETIC ESCHATOLOGY

In other lessons, we have seen that intervening historical contingencies can have significant effects on the ways God fulfills the predictions of his prophets. Well, in many

respects, in the later prophets we come upon one of the greatest intervening historical contingencies in the Old Testament. We'll discover that the reactions of God's people had a tremendous effect on the ways that the latter days, or the *eschaton*, would unfold.

As we look into this matter, we will touch on three subjects: first, Jeremiah's expectation; second, Daniel's insight; and finally, the final outlooks of the Old Testament prophets. First, let's look at the particular expectation Jeremiah raised about the restoration of Israel.

JEREMIAH'S EXPECTATION

In most respects, Jeremiah followed the pattern of early biblical prophecy. In two passages, however, Jeremiah added something not known before. He predicted that the time of exile would be seventy years. In 25:11-12 we read these words:

This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years. But when the seventy years are fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation (Jeremiah 25:11-12).

In a similar way, Jeremiah 29:10-11 says this:

"When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:10-11).

We see then that Jeremiah predicted that the exile would be over in seventy years.

In fact, according to 2 Chronicles 36:21-22, this prophecy was fulfilled when the first returnees came back to the land in 539 B.C. under the leadership of Zerubbabel. Zechariah also confirmed this dating in Zechariah 1:12 and in Zechariah 7:5. So we see that Jeremiah predicted that the exile would last seventy years and, in some respects, it did just that. In 539, Cyrus, the Persian emperor, announced that the Israelites were to go back to the land and rebuild their temple.

With Jeremiah's expectation of seventy years in mind, we're prepared to understand Daniel's new insight into eschatology.

DANIEL'S INSIGHT

Perhaps Daniel's most important contribution to prophecy was his famous vision of the seventy weeks of years in Daniel 9. This passage is an autobiographical account of an insight Daniel received around the year 539 when Cyrus gave his edict for the Israelites to return to the Land of Promise.

Daniel 9 begins with an introduction in verses 1-3. There Daniel reports that he was reading the prophecy of Jeremiah about the seventy years of exile. In verse 2 we read these words:

I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the Lord given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years (Daniel 9:2).

Now Daniel knew that Jeremiah said that the exile would last only seventy years, but instead of rejoicing, as we might expect Daniel to do, verse 3 tells us that Daniel did something quite different:

So I turned to the Lord and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes (Daniel 9:3).

Even though we might have expected Daniel to be happy that the seventy years of Jeremiah were over, instead he turned to the Lord in sackcloth and ashes seeking the favor of God.

In verses 4-19 we find a summary of Daniel's prayer. In this prayer, he deals with a very serious problem. Jeremiah's seventy years are complete, but the people have not repented of their sins. As he says in verses 13 and 14:

All this disaster has come upon us, yet we have not sought the favor of the Lord our God by turning from our sins and giving attention to your truth... we have not obeyed him (Daniel 9:13-14).

Daniel understood what we have already seen earlier in this lesson. Moses announced that exile would be reversed only when the people of God repented from their sins, but there was an unexpected intervening historical contingency here. The Israelites had gone into exile, but they still had not repented of their sins, and as a result, significant changes occurred in the ways that God would unfold the *eschaton*.

Daniel closed his prayer with a plea for mercy. Because the people had not repented of their rebellion, Daniel asked God simply to return the people just for his own glory. We read in verses 17 and 18:

For your sake, O Lord, look with favor on your desolate sanctuary. Give ear, O God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name. We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy (Daniel 9:17-18).

Daniel hoped against all hope that God would restore his people, despite the fact that they had not repented of their sins.

The remainder of Daniel 9:20-27 consists of God's response to Daniel's prayer. The angel Gabriel comes from God with a message. He tells Daniel this in 9:24:

Seventy “sevens” are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy (Daniel 9:24).

Put simply, Gabriel says that the exile had been extended from seventy years, according to Jeremiah, to seventy “sevens” of years, or about 490 years. Because the people had refused to repent, God decided to multiply the length of the exile seven times over. As God said in Leviticus 26:18:

If after all this you will not listen to me, I will punish you for your sins seven times over (Leviticus 26:18).

God delayed the restoration of Israel, and control of the Land of Promise was passed from one Gentile empire to another and to another and to another, until the kingdom of God came in Christ.

Now that we’ve seen Jeremiah’s prediction of seventy years of exile and how Daniel learned that it would be multiplied seven times to some 490 years, we are in a position to look at the final stages of Old Testament prophetic eschatology.

FINAL OUTLOOKS

The last stages of Old Testament prophecy took place during the restoration period after a number of Israelites were released from captivity and returned to the Promised Land. To understand how Old Testament eschatology looked in this final stage, we will consider two items: first, early restoration hopes; and second, later restoration hopes. Let’s first consider the initial hopes of the prophets who served in the early years after the first groups of Israelites returned to the land from Babylon.

Initial Hopes

At this point, we’re focusing on the initial period of restoration from 539 to 515 B.C. During this time, small groups of Israelites returned to the land with the hope of seeing the great blessings from God poured out quickly on the restored people of God. In many respects, they hoped to shorten Daniel’s 490-year delay by repenting and serving the Lord faithfully. Haggai and Zechariah focused on four eschatological hopes: the restoration of David’s throne, victory over Gentile nations, the restoration of the temple, and the renewal of nature. Haggai and Zechariah had great hopes for the people of God. They hoped that the faithfulness of God’s people at this time would bring many blessings to the newly formed nation.

Although hopes in Zerubbabel and the temple were very high in the early years after Israel returned to the land, this situation did not last long. Instead, we come to discover that the hopes of the later restoration period took a different turn. Zerubbabel

completed the temple as Haggai and Zechariah had instructed him, but as we learn from the second half of Zechariah, the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi, the people of Israel had little more than outward conformity to the will of God. Within one generation, there was widespread intermarriage with Gentile women, and widespread apostasy resulted. Consequently, the hopes of great blessings for Israel in the early post-exilic period were cast into the distant future.

Final Hopes

Malachi focused on this distant hope more than any other late prophet. He sharply rebuked those living in Jerusalem and warned them that a day of judgment and blessing was coming in the future. For instance, in Malachi 3:1 we read these words:

“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the Lord Almighty (Malachi 3:1).

And in his last words in 4:1-2, Malachi speaks of what will happen in that great future day:

“Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,” says the Lord Almighty... “But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall” (Malachi 4:1-2).

As the Old Testament closed, it became apparent that this salvation was not coming quickly. The people of God would have to wait for the full restoration.

We’ve seen that eschatology in the Old Testament began with Moses and that the early prophets opened many insights into these matters by adding royal and temple themes. Now, we’ve seen that Daniel and the last prophets of the Old Testament learned that the exile would be extended for a long time. Only then would the great divine intervention take place and bring restoration to God’s people. This brings us then to the last stage in biblical eschatology, the eschatology of the New Testament.

NEW TESTAMENT ESCHATOLOGY

Whenever we read Old Testament prophecy as Christians, we must follow the perspectives of New Testament writers. New Testament writers understood the developments of eschatology within the Old Testament, but they added to this the reality

of Jesus' ministry. Jesus came to this earth and caused a shift in the ways that eschatology would unfold, and as Christians, we must follow this perspective that's given to us in the New Testament. The New Testament picture of eschatology can be grasped as we consider three subjects: first, some central terminology in the New Testament; second, the basic structure of New Testament eschatology; and third, major eschatological themes that appear in New Testament. Let's look first at several important terms in the New Testament that give us an orientation to New Testament outlooks on the end of time.

TERMINOLOGY

We'll focus on three particularly important expressions: first, the word "gospel"; then the term "kingdom"; and finally the expression "latter days."

Gospel

The word "gospel" is familiar to every believer. It derives from the Greek word *euangelion*, which means "good news." Time and again, the New Testament tells us that Jesus and his apostles preached the "gospel" or the "good news." More than one hundred times New Testament writers speak of the Christian message about Christ as the gospel or good news. It's very important to realize that the New Testament did not invent this word "gospel." Instead, New Testament writers picked up the term "gospel" from the Old Testament prophets.

Old Testament prophets used the Hebrew word *basar* (בָּשָׂר) which is often translated "good news" or "glad tidings" on a number of occasions. What good news did they have in mind? Well, in a word, the good news announced by the prophets was the good news that the exile was over and that the restoration of God's people was coming. For example, listen to the way the prophet Isaiah spoke in Isaiah 52:5-7. In verses 5 and 6 we read these words:

For my people have been taken away for nothing, and those who rule them mock... Therefore my people will know my name ... that it is I who foretold it. Yes, it is I (Isaiah 52:5-6).

God announces that his people will see a great display of his power, and they will know that he foretold the restoration from exile. Then, reflecting on this assurance of restoration, Isaiah says this in verse 7:

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!" (Isaiah 52:7).

Isaiah announced that the appearance of certain messengers would be absolutely beautiful to behold. What kinds of messengers? Those who brought good news, or "gospel."

Now, this prophetic background to the word “gospel” helps us understand why Jesus and his apostles came announcing the gospel of Christ. Jesus brought the restoration from exile. In Luke 4:18-19 Jesus quoted Isaiah 61:1-2, and he applied it to his life:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor (Luke 4:18-19).

As this passage makes clear, Jesus saw himself as the one who brought the restoration from exile to the people of God.

A second important term in the New Testament reveals the same perspective. This is the term “kingdom.”

Kingdom

The New Testament frequently summarized the New Testament age as the age of the kingdom. Why was this terminology so prominent in the New Testament? The term kingdom was another way in which the New Testament acknowledged that Jesus had fulfilled the hopes of restoration after exile. Listen once again to Isaiah’s prophecy about the coming restoration from exile in Isaiah 52:7. There he related the gospel to the reign of God in this way:

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God reigns!” (Isaiah 52:7).

These last words — “your God reigns” — announces the restoration of God’s people, and their victory over the world, and this announcement provides us with a background to the teachings of Jesus on the kingdom of God. Jesus announced the restoration had come in him because God’s reign over the earth was being established.

A third expression also helps us understand the New Testament perspectives on the end of time, the term “latter days.”

Latter Days

You will recall that the Old Testament prophets used the term latter days to describe the period after exile. New Testament writers used the same expression to describe the New Testament period. For example, we read these words in Acts 2:17:

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people (Acts 2:17).

Time and again, New Testament writers refer to the whole New Testament period as the *eschaton*, or latter days. They did this because they were relying on Old Testament prophetic terminology. They saw the New Testament age as the culmination of prophetic expectations, the restoration of God's people. These important terms in the New Testament reveal the New Testament writers looked at their age as the fulfillment of Old Testament eschatological hopes. In a word, the final stage of human history came through Christ.

STRUCTURE

This orientation toward New Testament eschatology puts us in a position to see the basic structure that the New Testament reveals for the restoration kingdom. To examine this new outlook on eschatology, we will look at two expectations described in the New Testament: first, the expectations of John the Baptist, and second the expectations of Jesus. Consider first the outlook of John the Baptist.

John the Baptist

John the Baptist had an expectation for the kingdom of God that was very common in his day. By reading the Old Testament, John believed that when the Messiah came he would bring the kingdom all at once. Listen to how John spoke of the Messiah in Luke 3:16-17:

One more powerful than I will come ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire (Luke 3:16-17).

John believed, like Old Testament prophets, that when the restoration of Israel took place it would be a time of immediate blessing and judgment.

Jesus

Because of these Old Testament expectations of sudden final judgment and blessing, Jesus spent much of his ministry explaining to his followers that the *eschaton* was not coming as John and others expected. Instead, God had decided to bring the restoration slowly, stretching it out over time. Perhaps the clearest expression of Jesus' new revelation about the *eschaton* occurs in two parables in Matthew 13: 31-35. There, Jesus likened the kingdom of God to a small mustard seed that grows into a large plant. He also likened the Kingdom of God to yeast that gradually leavens a loaf. The point of

both of these parables is that the restoration kingdom was not coming all at once with judgment and blessing. Instead, it was coming through growth, or in stages.

The New Testament perspective on eschatology taught by Jesus and his disciples has come to be known as inaugurated eschatology. This inaugurated eschatology has been described in many ways, but it helps to view it as a three-fold structure. First, the coming of Christ was the inauguration of the kingdom. Christ's life, death, resurrection, ascension, Pentecost, and the ministries of the apostles formed the foundation, or the beginning, of the *eschaton*. The second stage of the restoration, according to the New Testament, may be called the continuation of the kingdom. This is the time in which we live today — after the first coming of Christ, but before his second coming. The third stage of the restoration may be described as the consummation of the kingdom. When Christ returns, he will bring the full measure of the restoration promised so long ago by the prophets. The whole of the New Testament fits within this basic structure of inaugurated eschatology.

THEMES

Having seen some key terminology and the basic structure of New Testament outlooks, we now should turn to some themes of eschatology which appear in the Old Testament, but then also appear in the New Testament. It will be useful to look at two main themes: the theme of exile and the theme of restoration.

Exile

First, consider the theme of exile. You will recall that the Old Testament motif of exile basically amounted to the fact that God threatened his people with severe judgment in war and in nature. These themes of exile are adjusted in the New Testament to the structure of inauguration, continuation, and consummation. In the first place, when Christ inaugurated his kingdom during his earthly ministry, he often spoke words of judgment against the covenant people.

The theme of exile is also related to the continuation of the kingdom. On the one hand, the judgment of spiritual exile from God's blessing continues for the physical children of Abraham who refuse to serve their Messiah. They are excluded from the blessings of God's kingdom. On the other hand, the same is also true for Gentiles who have come into the visible church. The New Testament makes it clear time and again that church discipline, climaxing in excommunication, was the way Gentiles and Jews in the church are exiled under judgment when they rebel against God.

Finally, the New Testament also teaches that in the consummation of the kingdom an eternal exile will take place. When Christ returns, he will sit in judgment over apostates and send them to everlasting judgment away from the blessings of the new heavens and the new earth. In these ways, we see that the motif of exile is fulfilled in the New Testament. But this fulfillment is shaped according to the stages of inauguration, continuation, and consummation.

Now, of course, the New Testament does not speak simply of the theme of exile. It also teaches plainly that the blessings of restoration for God's people have come in Christ.

Restoration

Old Testament prophets taught that in the latter days God would bless his people beyond measure in warfare and in nature. The New Testament teaches that these blessings of restoration also come in the three stages of Christ's kingdom.

In the first place, during the inauguration of the kingdom, we find many restoration themes characterizing the ministry of Christ. Just as the Old Testament prophets said David's throne would be reestablished, Jesus is called the "son of David," "the king." Just as the prophets of the Old Testament said the temple would be rebuilt during the latter days, Jesus is the temple of God. Just as the prophets predicted great victory over evil, pagan nations and their gods, Jesus began victory for his people by defeating Satan and the power of death. Just as the Old Testament prophets predicted a great inheritance for God's people, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit who is the down payment of our inheritance. And, of course, just as the prophets spoke of great blessings in nature, Jesus performed countless physical healings in his ministry. The New Testament teaches that Jesus' first coming was the beginning of the great final restoration to God's blessings.

In the second place, these themes of restoration also characterize the continuation of the kingdom — our time between the first and the second comings of Christ. Jesus continues to reign as king over the world, just as the prophets predicted for the son of David. The body of Christ is the fulfillment of Old Testament visions of the end-time temple of God. The church is now called the temple of God. The church has victories and spiritual battles against evil just as the prophets said God's people would have victory over the world. The Holy Spirit continues in the church as the down payment of our full inheritance. Moreover, Christians often see God's blessing on his people with physical healings and other special acts of providence. In these and many other ways, the New Testament makes it clear that the great promises of restoration find fulfillment in the continuation of the kingdom of Christ.

In the third place, the New Testament not only teaches that Christ inaugurated and continues restoration blessings, it also teaches that the consummation of the kingdom will bring the climax of all restoration promises from the Old Testament. When Jesus returns, his kingship will extend to all the world just as the prophets said David's son would reign over all the nations. When Jesus returns, the promise of a renewed temple will be fulfilled as God reshapes the whole new creation into one temple of God. At the end of this age, there will be a total victory over evil for God's people. The people of God will receive their full inheritance of the new creation. And, of course, nature will break forth into a paradise, fully renewed in the glory of salvation. In these ways and more, the prophecies of restoration will be fulfilled when Christ brings his kingdom to its consummation.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson on unfolding eschatology we've seen how the expectations for the finale of history developed from Moses, through the early prophets, to the later prophets, and then to the New Testament. Each step along the way we have seen that God revealed more and more of his plan for the culmination of the world.

Whenever we read Old Testament prophets speaking of the judgment of exile, we must look at this from the perspective of the New Testament. There is exile for covenant breakers in the inauguration of the kingdom, the continuation of the kingdom, and the culmination, or consummation, of the kingdom. And whenever we read Old Testament prophets speaking of the future blessings of restoration, we must always remember that these blessings come in the inauguration, continuation, and consummation of Christ's kingdom. If we keep these perspectives in mind, we'll be able to look at Old Testament prophesies with the eyes of New Testament writers and of Jesus himself.

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He Gave Us Prophets

LESSON
EIGHT

Unfolding Eschatology
Faculty Forum



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He Gave Us Prophets

Lesson Eight: Unfolding Eschatology

Faculty Forum

With

Andrew Abernethy, Ph.D.
Vincent Bacote, Ph.D.
Dr. Voddie Baucham, Jr.
Dr. Gary M. Burge
Dr. Constantine R. Campbell
Dr. D.A. Carson
Dr. David Correa
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Dr. Greg Perry
Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.
Dr. Timothy E. Saleska
Dr. Mark L. Strauss
Dr. Daniel Treier
Dr. Bill Ury

Question 1: What is eschatology?

Dr. Constantine R. Campbell

Eschatology is a fancy theological term that comes from two Greek words — *eschatos*, meaning “last,” and *logos*, meaning “word.” So, it’s the “study of the last things.” And there’s a strict way of speaking about it and then a broad way of speaking about it. The strict way is simply to talk about what will happen at the end of time when Jesus returns, what will that look like and so on and so forth. But the broader way to think about it is what actually does the New Testament, in particular, and the Bible as a whole say about how the end affects life now? So, for example, the fact that we are living in an “inaugurated eschatology,” an overlap of the old and the new, means that actually we can talk about eschatology and how it affects our life now. It’s not simply things off in the distant future that will happen one day, but actually something that has broken into our current life and experience now.

Dr. Keith Mathison

Eschatology, the word, has traditionally been defined as “the doctrine of the last things” based on the etymology of the word *eschatos* and *logos* — *eschatos* meaning the last things — and it’s traditionally had to do with both individual eschatology and what we might call “cosmic eschatology.” Individual eschatology deals with death and the intermediate state; cosmic eschatology, things like the second coming of Christ, the final judgment, the general resurrection and eternal destinies, heaven and hell. I like to look at eschatology in a broader sense, however. If we, if eschatology is associated with the second coming only, then we lose a lot of the eschatological aspects in the Gospels and in the teachings of Paul... Christ’s first coming was just as eschatological as his second coming, and if we see that and understand that, then we can start to have a broader biblical, theological view of eschatology, and the last

things began with the first coming of Christ. If we understand that, we realize that, also all of the Old Testament preparing for the first coming of Christ and looking forward to it is also eschatological. So, eschatology really begins with Genesis and ends with the book of Revelation. And a lot of people today get excited about eschatology because they get excited about “pinning the tail on the Antichrist” and figuring out, you know, all these dates. For me, the most exciting part about eschatology is the christological aspect of it. If we look at the first verses of Revelation 21 and 22 that describe the new heavens and earth, it talks about the doing away with pain and death and dying and sorrow. There will be no more of these things; the former things have passed away. And that’s great, but even better is that we’re going to be face to face with Jesus Christ. That’s what excites me about eschatology, not trying to figure out when the second coming or when the rapture is going to be, or whether this person or that person is the Antichrist. It’s being face to face with Christ that is the heart of eschatology.

Dr. Robert G. Lister

Eschatology, in the simplest definition of the word, is the study of the end times or the study of the last things, and so when we use the term in its simple sense, that’s all that it involves, is the study of the end times. We can apply eschatology in a couple of other particular senses. We can think of it in an individual or a personal way, and when we do that, we’re asking questions like: What happens to individuals, be they a believer or an unbeliever, following their death in this life, provided that that death takes place prior to the return of Christ? What about the intermediate state? Is there a separation of body and soul? What does the resurrection to judgment look like for individuals? On what basis does that judgment take place? And then, that individual’s reward in heaven or judgment in hell, what might that look like? Individual eschatology is what we’re talking about there. We might also think of cosmic or global eschatology, and there we’re thinking on a broader level, not just, what do the end times look like for individuals, and what are the implications for them? But what are God’s global purposes in the culmination of his plan of redemption for this earth? And there we would include broader discussions of things like the millennium in Revelation 20 — some competing interpretations on that. What is God’s plan for the new heavens and the new earth? Is it primarily spiritual? Is it primarily physical? Is it a combination of the two? What does the eternal state look like when God has assigned final judgment to believers and unbelievers, the resurrection of the just and the unjust? So we can kind of talk about it in those three components — the broad definition, on the one hand, the application to individuals, on the other hand, and then finally the cosmic implications of eschatology as well.

Question 2:**How does Moses use the term “latter days” in Deuteronomy 4?****Mr. Sherif Atef Fahim, translation**

Moses used the term “latter days” in Deuteronomy 4:27-31. So, what did Moses teach about the latter days in these verses of Deuteronomy? He taught three things, or he prophesied that three things would happen in the latter days. He said that the people would rebel against the Lord and, as a result, they would be punished with exile and be driven out of the land of Canaan, the Promised Land. Second, after the people were taken into exile, they would repent. And when the people repented, the third thing would happen to them — the Lord would restore them from the land of their captivity to “the land,” the land of Canaan, the Promised Land. These are the three things that Moses taught would happen in the latter days in the book of Deuteronomy: rebellion and exile, repentance, and restoration.

Andrew Abernethy, Ph.D.

There are times where you see the phrase “latter days” used, say, in the Pentateuch. One example is at the end of Deuteronomy 4. Now, we need to be careful when we see the term “latter days” that we don’t automatically jump ahead to the final, ultimate end of things, such as the eschaton. But in that context, what Moses is warning Israel about — as they’re about to enter the Promised Land — that when they get into the Promised Land, he says that if they disobey God and don’t follow what’s expected in the Sinai covenant that ultimately they could be kicked out of the Promised Land and sent into exile. So, what Moses is warning or speaking about is once they’ve been kicked out of the land, are in exile due to disobedience, what he says, though, is there is still hope for those people who have been kicked out of the land, that in the latter days they can turn to God and call upon him and bring them back. And of course this is a wonderful glimpse of our God who is willing to not give up on his people, but bring them back and restore them, which lays a great theological basis for who God is — a God who restores, a God who redeems even after sin. That provides a basis for understanding God’s later acts in the person of Jesus Christ and what he will do in the end ultimately.

Question 3:**What does Joel 2 teach us about the “day of the Lord”?****Dr. Timothy E. Saleska**

The “day of the Lord” is a powerful concept in, especially, the Prophets, and it’s a very complex term and one that really exemplifies the richness of our Christian faith and our Christian hope. In the Prophets, the day of the Lord really was this hoped for time when God would again visit his people. As the prophets talk about it, they talk about it in two different ways. First of all, as a day of judgment — against, first of all, the people of Israel and a day of judgment against their enemies — but also a day of salvation for his people... Sometimes their speech blends in from one to the other,

and the reason they do that is because the prophets want us to see the one in connection with the other. In other words, the historical days of judgment and salvation that we see God at work in history are ultimately foreshadowings or foretastes of *the* ultimate day of salvation. So that, for example, in the book of Joel you have the interesting case in which he seems to go from the historical day, to the eschatological day, and sometimes he's talking about what seems to be the historical day, but dresses it up in universal or eschatological language, especially in Joel 2... And so, it's very interesting to see that. Notice that the day of judgment, when we're talking especially about in eschatological terms, is a day in which, as I said before, the enemies would be judged, creation would be undone. The day of grace, or salvation, is filled with the presence of Yahweh amongst his people, the emphasis on the forgiveness of their sins, the renewal of creation. You see the promise of universal peace and unity among God's people.

Dr. Paul Gardner

One of the interesting terms that comes up in both the Old Testament and in the New Testament is that phrase, the "day of the Lord." And it is the day that the prophets refer to when God will save his people and when he will judge the nations... In Joel 2:31, we read this:

The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord (Joel 2:31, NIV).

It's a day of judgment for Joel, and yet it is also a great day of salvation. He goes on, and he says,

And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the Lord has said, among the survivors whom the Lord calls (Joel 2:32, NIV).

In the New Testament, of course, that is now taken up, and we understand it to be the time when Christ returns in glory, when he vindicates his people, and when his own name is vindicated in both the judgment, on the one hand, and in the great salvation and blessing of the end days for his people.

Question 4:

Why was Israel not fully restored after the 70 years of exile were completed?

Mr. Sherif Atef Fahim, translation

Why wasn't Israel fully restored after the 70 years of exile were completed? The reason was simply because the people were still living in sin. This is clear in the book of Daniel. At the beginning of chapter 9, Daniel says, "I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the Lord given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the

desolation of Jerusalem would last 70 years.” Yet, instead of rejoicing that these years were ending, Daniel was distraught, and he prayed, saying, “O Lord forgive us!” He confessed his sins and the sins of his people, because he knew that the people hadn’t repented and that the condition for restoration was that the people must repent. Indeed, the people didn’t repent, and Daniel prayed that the Lord might restore them according to his mercy and for the sake of his name. Unfortunately, Israel neither fully repented nor was fully restored after the 70 years because they were still living in sin.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

One of the most perplexing questions that Christians have had to deal with, and they’ve done it in a variety of ways, is why the restoration — during the days of Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah — why it did not move forward like one would expect if you read the prophets. In Jeremiah 25 and 29, the prophet Jeremiah says that the exile will come to an end in 70 years, and he also adds to that that the nations that persecuted Israel would collapse, they would come under the judgment of God, and that the great promises of restoration, of nature, and prosperity for Israel would come at that time too. So, it’s a problem when you think about what actually happened. And what actually happened was there was the beginning of restoration, and good things were happening. Eventually, they built the temple, and there were some positive things happening, but troubles came against that community and when they returned to the Promised Land... But what we have to remember is that when prophets predict the future, there is still this factor that if people don’t respond properly to the warnings and to the offers of blessing, then God will adjust the way he is going to fulfill these things. And this is why we have passages like Daniel 9 that really focuses on why the 70 years of Jeremiah is extended times seven to 490 years... It’s clearly a reference back, an allusion back to Leviticus 26 where God says, “I will discipline my people, and if they repent, great. But if they don’t, then I’ll multiply their discipline seven times, and then seven times more, and seven times more, and seven times more.” Now, in Leviticus 26, the end of that seven times, the multiplication seven times, is the great exile. Well, then what happens when Israel goes into exile and returns and they still do not repent as they ought? Well, this is precisely what Daniel explains in Daniel 9. God multiplies their judgment another seven times, from 70 years to 490 years... And even more than that, it’s also one of the reasons why we have books like Ezra and Nehemiah, because Ezra and Nehemiah go in detail as to what went wrong. Why was it that things did not unfold as one would expect from the prophetic word? And it was because the Israelites who returned continued to delay their response to God. It was nominal at best at first. They refused to build the temple. As the prophet Haggai said, “You continue to live in houses of cedar but the house of God lies in ruins”... And they also refused to repent from their hearts and sincerely turn to God. And that’s what you find in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. In fact, it’s so bad by the time the prophet Malachi does his ministry that Malachi says there’s going to have to be another radical intervention by God to straighten things out, and that he will have to purify the sons of Levi, and that there will be a dramatic, catastrophic event that will finally bring Israel to the stage where it begins to receive the blessings that were promised to them after the exile.

Question 5:

What does Leviticus 26 teach us about how God's judgment might be increased when Israel doesn't repent?

Rev. Sherif Gendy, translation

Leviticus 26 teaches us many things about God's patience in bringing divine judgment over the people. To understand God's patience in this chapter, we have to review quickly the division of this chapter. In verses 1 and 2, there is a request for full obedience to the Lord. Verses 3 through 13 talk about the blessings the Lord promised the people as a result of their obedience to the laws and rules. Verses 14 through 39 list the curses that will be the sanctions for disobedience and rebellion against the Lord. In verses 40 through 45, the Lord offers a way out of judgment through repentance and returning to the Lord. And the last verse, verse 46, is an epilogue. God's patience is revealed in this chapter in a very clear way. There is a progression in the judgment. For example, verses 14 through 17 tell us that the judgment will come in the form of diseases and defeat from their enemies. Yet, there is always an opportunity for repentance and returning to the Lord. However, if there is no repentance and returning to the Lord, judgment will be multiplied seven times. The term "seven times" is repeated more than once in this chapter — in verses 18 through 21, 23 and 24, and 27 and 28. But there is also an opportunity for repentance and returning to the Lord in verses 40 through 45. So, the Lord offers many opportunities for repentance and returning to him. And there is also a progression in judgment, but with every progression and increase in the severity of judgment, there is always a chance to repent and return to the Lord.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

Leviticus 26 has a lot to teach us about the nature of divine judgment. You see that God anticipates potential future disobedience by Israel, and that ... he's going to call his people back to repentance so that they can avoid the curses of the covenant. But you see this almost like a cascade in Leviticus 26. The warnings are going to be repeated, and they're going to be extended. It's not as if God is a referee, that as soon as the foot touches the out of bounds mark, you know, he throws the penalty flag. And really, you see this reflected largely in the book of Deuteronomy where God rehearses Israel's stiff-necked rebellion over time and his patience with them. It's where we see God's faithfulness manifested in his longsuffering.

Question 6:

What is the Old Testament background of the New Testament gospel?

Dr. Greg Perry

We get a couple of very important terms about gospel ministry from the prophet Isaiah. One comes from Isaiah 43, in this phrase: "You shall be my witnesses." It's a phrase that we hear in Acts 1:8 when Jesus is sending out his witnesses in the power of the Holy Spirit. The question is, witnesses to what? And the context of Isaiah 43

tells us, and that is, a witness to the nations that I am the only God, the only one who saves, the only king, that the only true kingdom, the only true Lord is the God of Israel — Yahweh, the God who saves, the God who redeems his people and the God who reigns, the Lord who reigns. So, we have that one term from Isaiah 43 that is very important for evangelism in Acts 1:8. Another important term is the term “gospel” itself in Isaiah 52: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.” Well, good news of what? Again, the importance here is the idea of God’s kingdom, that God as the king of his people has protected them in battle, has rescued them, has delivered them in battle, and that his kingdom is going to be the one that endures forever. And so, what we get in this sense of Isaiah 52 is that the gospel is connected to God’s kingship and that bringing the announcement of good news, yes, it’s about forgiveness, yes, it’s about a return to a covenant relationship with God, but what that really means is that God’s reign would be effective in our lives, in the places where we live, in every aspect of life, because if our king wins the victory in battle, then it’s going to be his law that takes root in that place, in that kingdom, in that realm. And so, two very important terms that inform our evangelism, inform our understanding of gospel ministry — the term “witness” and the term “gospel” — from Isaiah.

Dr. Craig S. Keener

When the New Testament speaks of the gospel, or the “good news,” it’s evoking imagery from the book of Isaiah, especially Isaiah 52:7, because in the context of that, God is promising to restore his people. And so, he says how blessed is the one, “the feet of those who bring good news to Zion, good news of peace, announcing, ‘Your God reigns.’” So, in the New Testament we read about the good news of peace, we read about the good news of God’s reign, God’s kingdom, and what that evokes is the promise that God is going to restore his people and bring salvation.

Question 7:

How did the Old Testament prophets characterize God’s eschatological kingdom?

Andrew Abernethy, Ph.D.

So, the idea of the kingdom of God is more of a concept that biblical theologians will use to talk about what the prophets were looking forward to. Now, each prophet has their own different flavor and way that they’re articulating things and expressing things. But when you think about a kingdom, any kingdom needs a king, any kingdom has a people, and any kingdom is in a particular place. So, one way of looking at what are the prophets looking towards, you ask, well, what are they looking for in terms of a king? Now, we might immediately think of a Davidic king. But the prophets are often looking ahead to God being the king. As you see in Isaiah 40, there’s this vision of God coming which develops in Isaiah 52 with the proclamation that God has come as king. And so, you see then that the prophets are looking for God who’s going to come as a king. So, you must ask, what does this king

care about? What does he want to bring about? Well, one of the elements that we see that God as king wants to bring about, according to the prophets, is he wants to establish justice and righteousness in this world. In a world of injustice, he wants to make things right. Now, one of the means that kings in the ancient world used to bring that about is to have kind of key leaders who would bring about those realities. Well, in the biblical vision, God the King is going to be using a Davidic king, an agent who's going to be establishing justice and righteousness in the world. So, you see in Isaiah 9 this vision of this son has been given, this child has been born. And what will that child accomplish? He will rule with justice and righteousness. In Isaiah 11, the Spirit is going to come out of a little shoot that's going to come from the stump of Jesse. And what will that Spirit enable him to do? He'll be wise but he'll also bring about justice and righteousness in this world. So, we see then that God the king will have an agent such as a Davidic king who's going to bring justice and righteousness. But we also see that God as king knows that reconciliation needs to happen between he and his sinful people, so that's where he sends, in Isaiah's vision, the suffering servant who will serve the role of dying as a substitutionary atonement for the sins of people who couldn't be right with God, for those who were sheep who have gone astray. So, we see then God using some key agents to bring about a reality where there can be justice and righteousness in the world and where there can be forgiveness of sins made possible for the people. Now, when we look at who the people are in God's kingdom, we're seeing these are people who are not just Israel. They're coming from all nations, streaming to God. And they will be like God in terms of carrying out what he cares about — justice and righteousness in this world. We'll see peace flooding the earth where lions and lambs will lie next to each other, which really, I think, is symbolic of nations who are hostile with one another having peace. So, we see then a grand vision in the Prophets of a king establishing his kingdom in this world, where he's creating a people, a community. But we need to ask what about place? And this is where Isaiah ... 65 beautifully portrays this hope of a new heaven and a new earth where all the realities where there's hunger and thirst will be reversed. There'll be great food. There'll be flowing water. It'll be like a return to Eden where the curses that were affecting creation before have been eradicated. So, this is the hope of the prophets, their hope in the kingdom, of God himself reigning as king with the people who live in line with him in a place that's like paradise.

Dr. Benjamin Gladd

The Old Testament prophets conceived of God's end-time kingdom, his eschatological kingdom, in several ways. One, when the kingdom does come, it's going to arrive all at once, for the most part. I mean, everything I'm saying is fairly general. We can find some niggles here and there, but for the most part, the kingdom is going to arrive all at once. It's not going to be staggered. Secondly, it's going to be very physical, very political. It's religion and politics in one. Thirdly, it's going to happen through the Messiah. The Messiah appears to suffer and die. We can see this from Zechariah and from Isaiah, maybe even from Daniel. So, the Messiah's going to usher it in. He's going to lead the revolt. Lastly, there's going to be a considerable amount of bloodshed, because Israel is going to have to completely dominate the

surrounding neighbors and bring everybody into subjugation around them. It's very physical; it happens all at once, very cataclysmic in other words, very terrifying. Yet it's restoration in a very full sense. But what's also attached to this — I mean, this is part of God's larger program, it's not just the kingdom that is coming in — it's God's Spirit is coming down, there's forgiveness of sin, there's resurrection, there's the new heavens and new earth. It's part of a larger program. The kingdom's arrival does not happen in piecemeal. It's kingdom and everything is working together, which is part of God's larger program, which will obviously climax in the new heavens and new earth.

Question 8:

Why do some theologians refer to the entire time from Christ's first coming to his final return as the "last days"?

Dr. Jeffrey A. Gibbs

One of the ways to think about the time that Christians find ourselves now living in, that is to say, the interval of unknown length between the first coming of Christ and his second coming, is to refer to that as — the entire period — as the last days. Now, the primary reason we do this is St. Peter does it in his Pentecost sermon in Acts 2. So, St. Peter says,

And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh.

So, these latter days is, to us, it seems strange. Why didn't God just accomplish salvation all at once, completely renew the earth in every way at Christ's first coming? The answer is, we don't know. We're not God. He gets to decide. But as we wait for Christ's return in glory and power, new things have started. The Holy Spirit has been poured out upon all Christians in a newer and more powerful way. God is doing new things in Jesus, sending the mission of his good news more energetically to all the nations than ever he had before. So again, God is doing new things. So, even though we await the fullness of what God will do in Jesus for his whole world and for the human race and for all who trust in him, even now, there's the paradox of the end has begun, but it hasn't yet fully been completed. And that understanding is foundational to a lot of what we do as Christians.

Dr. Bill Ury

Theologians refer to the entire time between the Lord's first coming and his second coming as the last days for a variety of reasons — not all of them do — but I can understand those that do... When we look at biblical history, there really are three basic elements. You've got the history of Israel, you have the incarnation — the life of Christ — and then the age of the church or the age where the kingdom of Jesus is made known through his Holy Spirit's power and presence which began at Pentecost. As the early church, and of course we now, two thousand years later, know a little

better, but they were expecting the Lord to return at any point. So they, in their writings, they expected the *parousia*, the appearing, the awareness of the presence of Jesus momentarily. They thought he was going to come any day. When he didn't come, they wanted to figure out why these passages talked like he was coming immediately. So, it's very, I think, understandable that people looking at it theologically would say, "Well, whatever happens after Jesus rose and went to the right hand of the Father, that is the end times, because the next step is we're going to heaven. Now we don't know how long that period is going to be, but rather than looking at it in terms of letting off of our desire to be all he wants us to be and to respond to all that he's offered to us as a church, that expectation of his soon coming is a necessary element to Christian living. So, the first creed of the church, many believe, was *maranatha* — "Come Lord." The belief in his immediate coming would be the last thing that happened before he comes again. Now, since we've had two thousand years to reflect on it, I think other people have debated that issue. But I don't think that it produces that much of a problem for interpretation or for theology. In fact, I think it actually motivates theology to consider his soon coming, his soon return in everything we're about. There's just something that adds a beautiful edge of hope and expectation to all that we do theologically if that's the case.

Dr. Mark L. Strauss

Many people think of the last days as some time in the future when the Antichrist will come or when, you know, events will climax with the second coming of Christ. But really, from a biblical perspective, the last days, or the end times begin with the first coming of Christ, in especially his life, death, and then resurrection. And why do we understand it that way? Because the Bible itself says that. For example, in Acts 2, Peter, on the day of Pentecost, quotes from Joel 2, and he says, "*In the last days* God says I will pour out my Spirit." So, he identifies the coming of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost as in some sense the inauguration of the end times, the inauguration of the last days. The reason for that, as we look throughout Scripture, is that Christ's resurrection is not just an isolated event in human history. Christ's resurrection is viewed as the beginning of the end time resurrection, the beginning of the resurrection of the dead which will signal the last days and the consummation of history itself. Paul refers to Christ as the firstborn from the dead and the firstfruits of the resurrection. That is, his resurrection guarantees that we, too, will rise from the dead. So, he is the beginning of the end times. When Christ returns, that will be the consummation or finishing up of the end times.

Question 9:

How does the New Testament reveal that the final stage of human history came through Jesus Christ?

Dr. D.A. Carson

The epistle to the Hebrews begins with a contrast between earlier times and these last days. In earlier times, "God spoke to the fathers through the prophets in various ways and means," and so forth, "but in these last days he has spoken to us" — the

expression in the original is subtle — not just “by his Son,” as if the Son is one more prophet, but “he has spoken unto us in the ‘Son revelation.’” The climax of all of this anterior revelation is the Lord Jesus himself. It’s not that God spoke through the prophets and now he speaks through Jesus as one more prophet, but Jesus himself is the Word. That’s not the vocabulary that Hebrews uses, but in this respect, he’s like John’s gospel: “In the beginning was the Word” — God’s self-expression — “and [this self-expression] was with God, and [this self-expression] was God.” Well, in these last days, these climactic days, these consummating days, then God’s final revelation has been disclosed, and this Son shows up as the exact radiance of his glory. That’s almost saying, “the light of his light.” How do you distinguish between radiance and glory? That’s partly the point. He’s the exact stamp of the very nature and being of God. And so, the culminating revelation is in Jesus Christ, and that’s what makes this the last days. So, what you have is the coming of the final revelation and there is no more revelation of that order to be given until all that has come because of him is fulfilled. So, that’s why we live in the last time, the last hour, the last days, until the culmination comes when Jesus himself returns at the end of the age. So, there’s a kind of running tension in the epistle of the Hebrews, as in various ways in much of the New Testament, between a joyful, cheerful recognition that we are already in the last times even though there is persecution and tribulation. In the words of 1 John, we know it’s the last times because there are antichrists that are already here. But at the same time, the last battle has been fought, the supreme revelation has come. This has eclipsed the earlier revelation, and now what we’re waiting for is the culmination of all things, the glory yet to be revealed, and that’s what makes this the last times.

Dr. Fredrick Long

God has spoken to us in his Son. This is a profound statement because it’s contrasted, or set in comparison relationship, to the many ways that God has spoken in the past. So ... the fact that God has sent his Son means that he’s spoken in a final way or in a more complete way, and here I think we need to understand that there is a progression of God’s revelation to us and that there’s a culmination point with the coming of Jesus in terms of God representing himself directly in his Son. And what this means is that there’s going to be an end of a certain way of people relating to God, that is, through a cultic system with a temple. And there’s a transformation that’s taking place. And so, “last days” can be understood in the sense of a closing down of a certain system of relating to God, while God is also opening up a greater, larger, more expansive way that people can relate to God and experience his presence and his Word. And so, specifically, that Word has come in his Son, so God has spoken directly to us now in his Son, and we had better listen to what he has to say for us to continue in relationship with God and to experience the salvation he has to offer us.

Dr. Barry Joslin

“Long ago, in many portions and in many different ways, God had spoken through the prophets and to the fathers, but now,” and here it is, “in these last days he has spoken in a Son,” in *his* Son, the one who had inherited his own name, the divine name, and he rules and reigns at the right hand. And so, that’s the first sentence of the

book of Hebrews, really the first four verses, the prologue. And so, this familiar New Testament idea is that the last days had been inaugurated with the coming of Christ, the first advent of Christ and would be consummated at his return. And so, whereas the Old Testament looked towards that day of the Messiah, the age of the Messiah — we see that in something like Joel 2:28-32 — Hebrews says that time is now here. These are the last days because God has now spoken the definitive and final word in his Son. What else does he need to say? What else does he need to do? The redemption that had been anticipated, the redemption that had been promised, has now found its fulfillment, or as Paul would say, it's "Yes" and "Amen" in Christ ... but these are the last days, and the only thing left to come is Christ to return and his kingdom be consummated, which has been inaugurated in his first coming in his person and work at the cross.

Question 10: **What is inaugurated eschatology?**

Dr. Dana M. Harris

Eschatology in general refers to the study, theological understanding, of the final destination of humanity and the world. So, theologians often think about three different kinds of eschatology. We can talk about *realized* eschatology, which would be the idea that eschatological teachings in the New Testament don't really refer to future events, but they've been fully accomplished in Jesus Christ already. Sometimes theologians talk about *future* eschatology, which of course then would suggest all these events are referring to future events. Many people, however, talk about *inaugurated* eschatology, which is often sometimes described as the "already, not yet" tension. This means that there are some aspects of the kingdom of God that we experience now and which Jesus ushered in when he first came, but that there are other aspects of the kingdom of God that we will not fully experience until Jesus returns.

Dr. David Correa, translation

The writers of the New Testament had the perspective that "this age" would be followed by "the age to come." So they had to make an adjustment. They maintained their firm belief and commitment that Jesus was the awaited Messiah who would bring the end of this age and would introduce the new age, or the age to come. However, we read in the New Testament that Jesus came, but he did not bring the eschaton in the way they expected. The enemies of God's people were not destroyed, and the awaited blessings of God's people, spoken of by the prophets, didn't arrive in the expected abundance. So, the New Testament writers had to make adjustments. So, we believe that while this age is still present, it is coming to its end. So, we see an overlap between the two ages, which is known as the "already but not yet" in many of the writings about New Testament eschatology.

Dr. Daniel Treier

Inaugurated eschatology is the belief that God's kingdom has been inaugurated in the first coming of Jesus Christ, but has not yet been fully consummated or realized, and won't be until his second coming to bring in the eternal state. We look at biblical texts like Luke 17:20, 21 to get at the "already" side of this inauguration. Jesus says that he has brought the kingdom of God into our midst, or he has brought it near. So, it's already here. In his person and ministry and speech, the kingdom of God has come, and this explains certain realities in the New Testament such as its appeal to Old Testament types and promises already being fulfilled in some sense, the New Testament frequently speaking of us being in the "last days," and so forth. These realities suggest that the kingdom of God is already inaugurated. But there's another set of texts that suggest that it's not yet fully consummated. Jesus tells us in the Lord's Prayer to pray, "Thy kingdom come" and gives us a sense of what it would mean for that kingdom to come when he has us pray, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." That's something we pray for because it's not yet here. Hebrews, quoting a Psalm, acknowledges we do not yet see all things subjected under his feet. That's something we still wait for when Jesus will deliver the kingdom over to God the Father and God will be all in all. That's not yet fully the case. And so, inaugurated eschatology gets at the two-sidedness of this reality of the already and the not yet... In the meantime, the resurrection power of the Holy Spirit has been poured out upon us as a guarantee of our future hope being fully realized and as an enablement for us to live between the times in the here and now, between Christ's first and second comings.

Dr. Gary M. Burge

Inaugurated eschatology is a distinctively Christian teaching, and it's to be compared with futurist eschatology. Let me explain. In theology, what we're saying is that the church understands that something is happening now. A portion of the future has now broken over the present, and so therefore, things are realized now in the Christian life that will not be realized at any other time in the past. They haven't been realized. So, let me give you an example. We understand that the Spirit of God now is available inside of the church; the power of God is here inside of this world. There is a concrete and tangible reality of God's presence inside of the church, and the description of that reality is actually something that comes from the future. So, what we mean is that we're not simply, as Christians, waiting for something to happen in the future. We're actually saying there is something now being birthed inside of the church, and that birthing is a work of God in the Spirit, which has been inaugurated, which has been begun by Jesus himself.

Question 11:**How are Old Testament themes of exile and restoration fulfilled now in the continuation of God's kingdom?****Rev. Sherif Gendy, translation**

The themes of exile and restoration are fulfilled now in the continuation of God's kingdom in various ways. First, the theme of exile is fulfilled now through the ministry of the church. The "seed of David according to the flesh" — humanity — is still in bondage to sin. There are still sinners and wicked people who resist submitting to the Lord and obeying him. They live in a state of spiritual exile because of the bondage of sin and the power of sin over them. Also, those who are within the covenant in the church sometimes fall under chastisement or church discipline. This is a form of exile in which a person is deprived of the Lord's blessings and fellowship with believers because of a certain sin. We still see and experience exile in our lives today in the continuation of God's kingdom. The theme of restoration is fulfilled in us today because the Holy Spirit is still the guarantor of our inheritance, dwelling in us, leading and guiding us. We still experience God's blessings in Christ on a daily basis. We still experience the Lord's protection, care, and victory over our enemies. We walk in the victory which Christ inaugurated on the cross. We still experience this victory on a daily basis by the help of the Holy Spirit in us. Thus, we see the themes of exile and restoration are continuing with us in the continuation of God's kingdom.

Pastor Doug McConnell

Well, I think as the kingdom continues to expand in the world, there's still a further re-gathering and restoration in that people are being called from every tribe and tongue and nation. Of course, in the book of Revelation that's what we look forward to, being around the throne with people from every tribe and tongue and nation. So, I think we see in that, that the gospel is going forward, and there is a restoration, because what's the goal of the restoration? Ultimately, it was not just for the Jews to be back in the land, but to be back with God, their God. And now, this Jewish God is being proclaimed by Christian missionaries throughout the world, and the nations are being brought in, and the gospel is going forward, and I think that's where we see this restoration taking place.

Question 12:**Why is it important to believe that Jesus will return to earth?****Vincent Bacote, Ph.D.**

It might be easy to think that because Christ died on the cross and ascended, because he said, "it is finished" that there's no reason for him to return. First, he said, "I'm coming back," so there's the fact that he said he's coming back, period, that we have to reckon with. Now this other part of it, though, is he's coming back as king; he's coming back to reign. And so, this is how God's rule is going to be established on the earth in the end. So, why does he need to come back? He's coming back to rule and to reign and for God's creation to be belonging fully to him in an undisputed fashion.

Dr. Voddie Baucham, Jr.

It's necessary for Jesus to return because God's work is not done. God's plan is not completed. There is creation, there was a fall, there is redemption in Christ, and there will be consummation. History is coming to a close. God is going to wrap things up. All things that are wrong will be set right. And Christ has promised that he would return. He says in John 14 that he goes to prepare a place for us, and that if he goes and prepares a place for us, he'll return and receive us unto himself. Christ is also going to return to judge the living and the dead... There are a number of reasons that the return of Christ is important, not the least of which is that the return of Christ is sort of the consummation of the resurrection of Christ. He *is* risen. He is risen indeed. But he is risen *that* he might come again. And this is what we say in the Lord's Supper. Right? "As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." This is central to the message of the gospel.

Question 13:**How will the new heavens and new earth compare to the Old Testament temple?****Dr. Timothy E. Saleska**

First of all, I want to talk a little about the significance of the temple, the sanctuary of God's people. I think the most significant thing to consider when looking at the temple and the part it played in the life of God's people is the idea that the Lord was truly present there with his people. When he built the tabernacle we can see that the *kavod Yahweh*, the glory of Yahweh, dwelt there. And the significance for the people is played out in the book of Exodus after the incident of the golden calf where Yahweh threatened not to go in the midst of his people, because they were so stiff-necked, he said, and stubborn, his wrath would break out against them and wipe them out. And Moses then at that time said, "Well, if you're not going to go with us, I'm not going to go, because how will other people know that you've actually chosen us?" So, one of the distinctive things that Israel said about itself and its identity as God's people was that the Lord had chosen them as a people, to be with them and dwell with them. And so, the tabernacle, or later, the temple, was the place where the Israelites could go to be assured of God's forgiveness and his mercy, and be assured that he was for them. One of the unique things about their worship life there, then, was especially, for example, the fellowship offerings where they would eat and drink in the presence of Yahweh. And that was a little foretaste of the feast to come, as we would say it, of the eschaton, the last days, that will mark their existence in the new heavens and the new earth, so that in the sanctuary and in the worship life of God's people, whenever they went up to the sanctuary, there was the idea that they were going up there to meet Yahweh, to receive his forgiveness, assurance of his grace and salvation. So, in a sense, that too was an in-breaking of the future eschaton into the presence of God's people. It's also interesting, and you can kind of look at this when you look at the architecture of the tabernacle and then the temple, that there was a

creation theme, or a “back to Eden” theme built into the architecture and into the various art and artifacts in the tabernacle and temple, so that when they went into the temple to worship, not only did they go back in time to the restoration, to the making of things as they were before the Fall, but it was also then a reminder of how, in the future in the new heavens and the new earth, things would be like Yahweh created them to be when he said in Genesis, after he’d created this, it was all very good. And so, it’s no coincidence that when we go to the book of Revelation, Revelation 21, the new heavens and the new earth are talked about in terms of the temple — God dwelling with his people, his people in his presence, delighting in him, worshiping him. And so, the temple is a significant experience for God’s people in which they were assured of his presence and already received a foretaste of what God had in store for them for all eternity in the new age.

Dr. Jeffrey A. Gibbs

Part of the glorious vision that St. John gives us of the new heavens and the new earth, which is to say, the renewed creation, is that he shows that in some ways it’s like, but much greater and more wonderful than, the Old Testament temple. So, if we think about the promises of God in the Old Testament for the temple, it was the place where his glory would dwell. It was the place — although God was available for prayer and intercession anywhere, you could call upon him from any place — yet uniquely, his presence would be there to protect and to save and to forgive his people. It’s so striking that in Revelation 21 John says,

And I saw no temple in the city (Revelation 21:22).

— talking there about the vision of the last day and of the heavenly Jerusalem which has now come down. Again, it’s always down, the direction of salvation is always from God down to us, right? So, in the new creation there is no temple, and one way to understand that is that the promise of the Old Testament temple and of God’s saving presence has now been exploded and expanded to embrace the entire creation, so that will God dwell with his people? Yes, but in a way so great that we can scarcely imagine. Will God wipe away every tear from their eyes? Yes, and, as I like to say, we’ll *have* eyes. As Job said, “My own eyes will see him and not another.” So, it’s the Old Testament temple is the type. The new creation is the anti-type — greater, more powerful, more wonderful than we can ever imagine.

Question 14:

How should we respond to the fact that at the consummation of God’s kingdom, creation will experience God’s redemption?

Dr. Douglas Moo

I think Christians all around the world are wrestling with the impact of the environmental movement and environmental concerns. A lot of Christians are very uncertain about how to respond and what their role should be. As I understand the

Bible, it teaches ultimately that the creation itself will be affected by God's promises, that it's not just humans whom God is concerned about, it's his entire creation. So, as I read the Scripture at least, God has plans for this actual world we live on. He created it. He's concerned about it. He has a future for it. Exactly what that future will look like is hard to say. The Bible talks about a new heaven and a new earth, which I think is in some continuity with this present world but also is a transformed world, a redeemed world, a place where believers will live forever, enjoying the presence of God and Christ. I do think, therefore, that the future of what God is doing in the created world carries some implications for how we treat God's world now, that it is his creation, and we should work as his people at being very good stewards of the creation he has made and plans to redeem.

Dr. Amy L. Peeler

When the Fall happened, we know that it affected humanity. Humans sinned, and they reaped the repercussions of their sin. But Scripture also talks about how that sin has infiltrated all of God's creation. In Romans 8, Paul says that creation too is groaning, anticipating the day that God's redemption will come. And so, I think we get a picture of what that redemption will look like several places in the New Testament. I think preeminently of Revelation 21 and 22, also 1 Peter 3 that talk about a new heavens and a new earth. God will not eliminate the world. He will renew it. Now, that may come through the purging of fire and difficult trials, but all creation, the New Testament seems to indicate, will be renewed. And so, that means for us right now, we need to be good stewards of what God has given us, because it won't be destroyed and eliminated, it will be renewed. And that is the hope, not just of humanity but of all of God's creation.

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