

THE 
PRESENT
WORD
ADULT BIBLE LESSONS

LEADER'S GUIDE

SPRING 2021

PROPHETS FAITHFUL TO GOD'S COVENANT

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Introduction

Today's secular culture has a particular fascination with prophecy. Movies, websites, and social media focus on apocalyptic prophecies of destruction and visions of the end times. Popular fiction that interprets sources like the book of Revelation literally speculate who will be left behind. Other media may present images of zombies roaming the earth following a pandemic or invasions from far beyond this galaxy. We can imagine the messages on the placards of the so-called street corner prophets who call us to repent from any number of attitudes and actions, depending on their political, social, or religious perspective.

People of faith have a different worldview. In the biblical record, we read of God's call to prophets to deliver the message of repentance. A quick review of the lessons in this quarter gives us an idea of the scope of prophecy and of the men and women called to be prophets—faithful prophets of wisdom, courage, deliverance, and salvation, who take action to rebuild and plead for restoration, speak truth to power and offer hope and comfort in difficult circumstances, and demonstrate human frailties and stubbornness. And always, those faithful prophets show us a God who calls us to repentance, yet is steadfast and faithful, slow to anger and abundant in grace.

May your understanding of God be shaped by this study of the prophets who carried God's word and preached God's message across the centuries. May you discern how God is calling you to speak and witness prophetically in a world hungry for a word of truth.

The Uniform Series

The Present Word quarterly Bible study is based on the Uniform Series, a plan for reading and studying the Bible. The objectives of the series are to help persons increasingly:

1. to know the content of the Bible,
2. to understand the message of the Bible in light of their experiences and relationships, and
3. to be aware of God's self-disclosure, especially God's redeeming love as revealed in Jesus Christ, that they may respond in faith and love—to the end that they may know who they are and what their human situation means, grow as the children of God rooted in the Christian community, live in the Spirit of God in every relationship, fulfill their common discipleship in the world, and abide in the Christian hope.

The emphasis in these objectives is on the Bible as the record of the revelation of God in Christ as the primary source of understanding the meaning of the Christian faith and as the most effective means of confronting persons with the significant concerns of the gospel. These concerns include personal faith, values, human relationships, social responsibility, Christian hope, and the implications of Christian discipleship under the lordship of Christ and in the fellowship of his Spirit.

One of the distinctive features of the Uniform Series is the collaborative process through which denominational partners engage in the common task of developing the Lesson Guides. The development process begins with a Scope and Sequence subcommittee whose work sets a framework for the biblical themes of each six-year cycle. The Scope and Sequence team for Cycle 23 (2016–2022) chose themes that are creatively expressed in this statement of Christian faith:

The God of the Bible, the source of creation, loves us and calls us in covenant through our faith to worship and to do justice.

The underlined words in the statement compose the eight recurring themes throughout each quarterly segment of *The Present Word*.

Quarter in Brief

This quarter introduces the ministry of the Old Testament prophets. God employs people who live among Israel and Judah to be spokespersons for God. A formal representative of God, the prophet has a message meant to effect social change that conforms to God's desired standards as prescribed under the Law.

Unit I, "Faithful Prophets," has four sessions drawn from Exodus, Deuteronomy, Joshua, 1 and 2 Kings, and explores the reasons prophets were necessary in Israel's history. Moses leads the people out of Egypt, thus fulfilling God's promise to bring the people back to Canaan. In Deuteronomy, Moses gives the people God's promise to give them prophets who will speak God's word to them. Stories about Joshua, Huldah, and Elijah illustrate the fulfillment of God's promise given through Moses.

Unit II, "Prophets of Restoration," has four sessions, which reveal the compassion of God during the times in Israel's history when the people continually forsook the ways of God. On Easter, Isaiah's prophetic writings and the book of Luke are used to portray Jesus as the Suffering Servant and the one through whom believers receive salvation. Passages from the prophecies in Ezra, Nehemiah, and Lamentations show the faith of the prophets as they presented new hope to the Israelites.

Unit III, "Courageous Prophets of Change," has five sessions, which show the boldness of God's prophets in 1 Kings, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Jonah. Israel and Judah were released from captivity and charged to rebuild Jerusalem. God sent prophets to call the people to restore their covenant relationship with God. When the people strayed away from their covenant with God, the prophets called them back.

Resources for the Leader

The following resources are suggested for those who are interested in doing additional research and study.

Bible Study Guides

A Guide to Bible Basics by Tyler D. Mayfield. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018.

A Guide through the Old Testament by Celia Brewer Sinclair. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989.

Bible Commentaries

New Daily Study Bible, by William Barclay. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003–2017.

Old Testament for Everyone, by John Goldingay. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010–2016.

Isaiah 1–39, by Walter Brueggemann. Westminster Bible Companion, Patrick D. Miller and David L. Bartlett, editors. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.

Isaiah 40–66, by Walter Brueggemann. Westminster Bible Companion, Patrick D. Miller and David L. Bartlett, editors. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.

Isaiah 40–66, by Paul D. Hanson. Interpretation Bible Studies. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995.

The Women's Bible Commentary, Revised and Updated, Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, editors. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012.

Bible Dictionaries

Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible. Edited by David Noel Freedman. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000.

HarperCollins Bible Dictionary—Revised and Updated. Edited by Mark Allan Powell. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2011.

Video Viewing

When you show videos to a group, you need to obtain a public performance license from Christian Video Licensing International (CVLI) at <https://us.cvli.com>. Check with your church to see if an umbrella license has already been obtained. Many denominations—through conferences, jurisdictions, dioceses, and other structures—secure licenses for their churches.

Worship Leaflets

Geneva Press offers *The Present Word* quarterly Worship Leaflets. Each leaflet includes a brief service of worship with prayers, hymn texts, and opportunities for reflection on the Scripture passage of the day. Order your quarterly *Present Word* Worship Leaflets at pcusastore.com.

MOSES: PROPHET OF DELIVERANCE

Daily Bible Readings

M	Mar. 1	Ps. 77:11–20	Remember God’s Acts of Deliverance
T	Mar. 2	Luke 16:24–31	Listen to Moses, Witness with Authority
W	Mar. 3	Exod. 12:43–50	Instructions for Observing the Passover
Th	Mar. 4	Num. 9:9–14	Aliens and Unclean Share Passover Meal
F	Mar. 5	Exod. 13:1–2; Deut. 15:19–20	Consecrate All Firstborn to God
Sa	Mar. 6	Exod. 13:3–10	Observe Festival of Unleavened Bread

MAIN IDEA

How are we to respond when the seemingly impossible is asked of us? Following the command of God, the people of Israel left Egypt under the leadership of a faithful prophet, Moses, who became a model for prophets to come.

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Deuteronomy 18:15–22

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. (Deut. 18:15)

PREPARING TO LEAD

- Pray for participants and for yourself as leader. Read and reflect on lesson 1, “Moses: Prophet of Deliverance” (Participant’s Book, p. 1).
- Familiarize yourself with the context of the Scripture. The author tells us that in Deuteronomy, the Old Testament book from which Jesus most often quoted, there are three sermons traditionally attributed to Israel’s most beloved prophet, Moses.
- Provide Bibles, Participant Books, and Worship Leaflets for lesson 1, nametags, and pens.
- On a board or a sheet of newsprint, post the following open-ended prompt: “A prophet is”
- Obtain a white pillar candle to serve as the Christ candle. Because it is Lent, refrain from lighting the candle.

- If you decide to use the optional Scripture reading activity, touch base in advance with a participant and invite that person to read the passage aloud as if it were a sermon or plan to present the “sermon” yourself.
- Step 6 in each lesson offers additional options from which to choose.

LEADING THE LESSON

Opening Worship

1. Gathering

- Greet participants and provide nametags. If participants are not familiar with one another, form pairs. Ask partners to discuss their responses to the prompt written on the board or newsprint. In the full group, ask participants to introduce their partner and report one insight from their discussion.
- If participants know one another, discuss their responses to the prompt in the full group.
- Distribute Bibles, Participant’s Books, and Worship Leaflets for lesson 1.
- Formulate and get consensus on some simple ground rules for the study (for example, welcoming diverse points of view, maintaining confidentiality, and so on).

2. Morning Prayer 1

Worship Leaflet, lesson 1

- Note that the Christ candle remains unlit as a symbol of the Lenten season.
- Encourage participants to settle into silence.
- Invite volunteers to lead portions of Morning Prayer from the Worship Leaflet, beginning with the Opening Sentences and ending after the Morning Psalm.

Teaching Tip
<p>Most scholars have identified the core of Deuteronomy with the book of the Law found in the Temple in the time of King Josiah (641–609 BCE). The book as a whole was likely composed in the context of religious reforms advanced by King Josiah, perhaps by a Levite who was attempting to turn his contemporaries away from polytheism. But placing the sermons of Deuteronomy in the mouth of Moses is not completely fiction, because it represents a revival of the Mosaic teaching as it was understood in the seventh century.</p>

SCRIPTURE

Deuteronomy 18:15–22

18:15 The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. ¹⁶This is what you requested of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: “If I hear the voice of the LORD my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.” ¹⁷Then the LORD replied to me: “They are right in what they have said. ¹⁸I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. ¹⁹Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. ²⁰But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die.” ²¹You may say to yourself, “How can we recognize a word that the LORD has not spoken?” ²²If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it.

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

Bible Study

3. Scripture Reading

Participant’s Book, p. 2

- Read the Scripture aloud round robin style, with each person reading one verse in turn.
- Option: Invite participants to imagine being in a crowd hearing Moses preach the Scripture passage as a sermon. Then have the person you recruited read the passage aloud or do so yourself.

Discuss:

1. What key takeaways did you hear in this sermon?
2. What questions might you have asked Moses at the conclusion of the sermon?

4. Moses

Participant's Book, p. 2

- Call attention to the information in the Teaching Tip about the authorship of Deuteronomy and its intention to recall for the people the original faith of Moses' time.
- We read that Deuteronomy provides us with Moses' instruction book for use by the people of Israel. Discuss some of the following:
 1. What were Moses' sermons intended to do?
 2. Why did God give the people prophets, and what were the qualifications of a prophet?
 3. The author observes that because of their experience of the Holy One at the giving of the Law, the people were intimidated by God. How would you characterize your own understanding of God? Do you view the divine as intimidating? As distant? Do you experience God as a personal way?
 4. There were hundreds of so-called prophets in ancient times. How does the author suggest the people were to distinguish true prophets from false? How do we determine the difference between preachers and prophets?
 5. Why did the people trust Moses? How did he become a leader for the Israelites? How are we leaders in our communities?

5. Covenant

Participant's Book, p. 4

- Invite volunteers to describe elements in Moses' farewell address that show the unique pattern of treaties. Ask the group to define "covenant" and to name some examples. Discuss:
 1. In what ways was the covenant made at Sinai in Exodus 19 significant?
 2. What do treaties and covenants have in common? How would you distinguish between the two?
 3. What was the role of the prophet in covenant making?
 4. Where do you see covenants lived out in your faith communities?

6. Stepping into the World

Participant's Book, p. 5

- Invite participants to call out, popcorn style, examples of false prophets. Print their responses on newsprint or a board. Invite them to name in similar fashion what they would consider false messages and record their responses. Discuss:
 1. This passage in Deuteronomy suggests a criterion for distinguishing false prophecy from true. What is it? How would you interpret the statement “If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the LORD has not spoken.”? Doesn't this imply that the conventional wisdom about prophecy—that it predicts the future—is accurate? If not, how would you contrast that with the biblical understanding?
 2. Who are Christian leaders in your life that provide messages of love and hope?
 3. Today those who claim to be prophets are likely serving their own social, political, or personal interests. The question is posed: How do we know if someone is truly speaking for God or if they are using God to try to increase their own credibility?
- Choose from among these optional ideas to explore the Scripture:
 1. Invite participants to make placards with messages that might be communicated by a street corner prophet or some person they might identify as a false prophet. Invite volunteers to show their placards and identify the false prophets they had in mind.
 2. List qualities of trustworthy and untrustworthy leaders. Discuss how Moses exemplified the qualities of a trustworthy leader.

Closing Worship

7. Morning Prayer 2

Worship Leaflet, lesson 1

- Invite the participants to turn to the Worship Leaflet and enlist volunteers to lead the remaining portions of morning prayer.
- Begin with Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession, say the Lord's Prayer, and end with the Dismissal.
- Bless participants as they leave. This can be as simple as saying “(Name), trust that God's steadfast love will never come to an end.”

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture that may be helpful for your study.

1. The phrases “prophet like me” (Deut. 18:15) and “prophet like you” (v. 18) have immediate reference to the line of Israelite prophets. However, they find their ultimate fulfillment in the prophetic ministry of Christ (see Acts 3:19–23).
2. Moses warns against false prophets (18:20). Eventual fulfillment is one test of true prophecy (18:20) though further tests may also be required (Deut. 13:1–5).
3. Moses, as a prophet, had spoken on God’s behalf (Exod. 3–4). God puts God’s words in the mouth of God’s prophets (v. 18, Jer. 1:7–9).
4. In Egypt, Pharaoh assumed divinity for himself. Moses’ request to free the Israelites temporarily to worship their God was seen as a rejection of the divinity of Pharaoh.

ENGAGE YOUR LEARNERS DURING THE WEEK

Send an email or a text:

1. Encouraging participants to be alert in the coming week to messages that are communicated in social media or in news accounts. Where is there evidence of false prophets at work? How is the church’s message countering these false messages?
2. Suggesting that they focus in particular on the passages from Joshua in the Daily Bible Readings, as they will provide context for the next lesson.