

THE PRESENT WORD

ADULT BIBLE LESSONS

PARTICIPANT'S BOOK

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.

MOSES: PROPHET OF DELIVERANCE

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)

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

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

The book of Deuteronomy includes three long sermons attributed to Moses. Each one serves slightly different purposes and addresses different audiences, but everyone can take something away from them. Deuteronomy reminds us of God's faithfulness and the importance of our obedience and loyalty to God. This book also reminds us that God is with us all the time, especially when we feel overwhelmed or have new, difficult tasks in front of us. These sermons remind us to love our neighbors. They describe the forty years of desert wandering the Israelites faced in the search for the Promised Land. The writer of the sermons makes sure God's people understand the lessons worth learning from their questions and struggles. The lessons serve as tools to help the people survive and to have faith in God's promise.

These sermons also remind God's people of God's promises and the prophets who will give them the word of the Lord. The prophets were all necessary members of Israel's history and stewards of God's word. Much of Deuteronomy focuses

on strengthening love for and loyalty to the Lord. There is a challenge placed within the stories: finding obedience and life, or disobedience and death. Deuteronomy demonstrates God's power and ability to save. The text calls upon God's desire for our faith, fairness, and justice. But when we fail at these things, God also promises to forgive us and love us still. Because of this, we are reminded to "Love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut. 6:5).

Deuteronomy gives us an example of living faith and teaches us how we can serve God through our actions in our communities and the greater world. Jesus quotes Deuteronomy in the New Testament—more than any other Old Testament book—because of the stories' deep rootedness in love and faith.

Faithful God, may we be reminded to love strongly with all our heart and soul. Amen.



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.

MOSES

Before Joshua became leader of God's people after Moses' death, Moses shared his words of wisdom for God's people.

Deuteronomy provides us with Moses' instruction book for ancient life, intended for use by the people of Israel. The Israelites had known only Moses as their true leader throughout their time wandering through the desert. His impending death created an unsettling air among the people. Moses' words in Deuteronomy preserve his message for Israel forever. His sermons do more than provide information; they tell the people how they can live lives full of love and hope and follow God's will. They emphasize the importance of faith in everyday life.

Today's passage highlights the reasons God gave us prophets and why they are necessary leaders. Looking back at Exodus 19 and 20, this section reminds us of the giving of the Law. God seemed to be an intimidating force; the people were frightened when God spoke, so Moses was chosen as a mediator between God and God's people. The prophet, then, is a special individual chosen by God to impart God's word (note "I raise up," vv. 15, 18; "I will put my words," v. 18; and "I command," v. 18) and to communicate with the people. Prophets also are selected because of the leadership they show in their communities. They know the ways of the local culture; they speak the truth and know the hearts of the peoples around them. God's followers want to listen to these natural leaders in their communities. Prophets who speak God's word are worth listening to; ignoring the prophets is like ignoring God (v. 19).

Wouldn't people who claim to speak for God be a dime a dozen? How would God's people know God's true chosen prophets? The answer is simple. If a prophet speaks something into existence, then they are indeed a prophet. If what they say becomes reality, then they are speaking God's word. Often, prophets speak of unknowable things such as eternity, death, and life itself. Not everything in life is knowable for the average person, so the prophets help lead people in the right direction. Sometimes, however, prophets could be unscrupulous and lead people astray. Deuteronomy makes note that if people are led astray by a prophet, the people are not to blame; rather, the "bad apple" prophet preying on the weak or vulnerable is responsible.

The truth is, the Bible speaks of hundreds of prophets. 1 Kings 22:6 mentions 400 prophets roaming the nation as helpers for the king of Israel. Finding a prophet was ultimately not a challenge. Finding a prophet *who actually spoke for God* was the problem. A prophet's job was to act as a mouthpiece for God. On the

other hand, preachers led communities in worship and provided spiritual guidance in that respect. Prophets were more interpreters of God's word than anything else.

❓ Why did the people trust Moses? How did he become a leader for the Israelites? How are we leaders in our communities?

COVENANT

Deuteronomy is an interpretation of the record of Moses' sermons addressed to the peoples of Israel. The sermons purport to have been preached in approximately 1,260 BCE on the great plains of Moab. Right before the Israelites entered the Promised Land, Moses delivered his farewell address.

Reaffirming the Sinai covenant, the address embodies a unique pattern specific to treaties. It includes an introduction and author note, a prologue outlining historical relevancies and relationships of the different groups involved, information regarding the mutual responsibilities of the parties, consequences for failing to keep the covenant, and a succession arrangement.

The Biblical record of the covenants was written down around the same time that Israel was making international treaties and agreements. In fact, in the Hebrew language, "international treaty" and "covenant between God and the Israelites" are translated with the same phrase. The first recognizable covenant God made was with Noah in Genesis 9. In Genesis 15–17, God and Abraham made a covenant. Of all the Old Testament covenants, however, the covenant made at Sinai in Exodus 19 remains the most salient. This covenant did more than simply make God's word law in Israel; aside from lawgiving, this covenant also laid the groundwork for Israel to become an exclusively holy nation, giving loyalty to God and the word of God. The covenant of Sinai created the framework for all future covenants regarding building the nation of Israel and served as a sacred model.

Deuteronomy has long been known for its rhetorical style. Even the covenant formulation is complex and includes appeals, form, flowery language, and specific ways of framing ideology. Treaties in biblical times often were used to gain support from new royalty or strong leaders in communities and using stylistic language helped in the efforts to gain their loyalty and obedi-

ence. Such rhetoric-based linguistic characteristics match Deuteronomy's style.

Covenants and treaties both use a historical introduction at the beginning of the document to give context to the importance of the work. Another element that they share is the grace and mercy of the author of the document. God reminds the Israelites how powerful mercy can be: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt . . ." (Exod. 20:2). It is part of a prophet's job to engage the people and remind them of consequences within covenants, or covenant curses. The prophets make sure people know they have entered into a holy bond and are responsible for their actions. Amos 3:2 depicts this prophetic threat in action: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; / therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities."



Where do you see covenants lived out in your faith communities?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

Do you ever wonder who the prophets are today? Think about messages on any given day on cable TV and network religion channels, religious resource websites, or even the big-city milk carton "prophets." If you walk down the streets of Los Angeles, New York, or any other big city, there is a high probability that you will witness someone taking up city block real estate shouting the "word of God." There may even be megaphones involved. Regardless, the messages may seem similar: "God loves you;" "You will descend into hell;" or "[insert group name] are God's chosen followers." People associated with a variety of groups may think of themselves as prophets, spreading their version of God's word. Sometimes it is hard to wade through the multiple messages and different beliefs.

A false prophet is most likely someone who is saying things with little or no obvious merit. If nothing they are saying is true or has proven true, chances are they are not actualizing the power of God's word but instead are serving their own agendas. We are not mind readers, nor do we possess magical powers to tell if others are prophets, but we can tell if they are spouting things that are not being actualized and do not truly align with the word of God. Deuteronomy provides another important

reminder for God's people today: "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses . . ." (Deut. 34:10).

How do we know if someone is truly speaking for God or if they are using God to try to increase their own credibility? These questions are not unique to our times. In Mark 1:21–28, we see Jesus being questioned as the "real deal" prophet connected to God. Maybe people did not trust Jesus initially because of his pedigree or because of the people with whom he decided to spend time. After all, Jesus was unafraid of associating with thieves, prostitutes, and those who were poor. He embraced and welcomed the most destitute as children of God and continues to serve as an example of compassion for all. Even so, his truth was not always popular, and it resulted in his crucifixion. Nonetheless, he was the Messiah, whether or not people were ready or able to understand how or why. Jesus preached of love, forgiveness, and grace. These were not messages everyone was open to hear, but Jesus remained patient. God's will had to be known, even if people were not quite ready to hear it.

? True prophets like Moses are not the only people who can provide guidance or help in our times of need. Who are Christian leaders in your life that provide messages of love and hope?

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.