

WEEK ONE

What Is a Prophet?

A Word from the Author

As we consider plunging into this great book of Isaiah, we are dealing once again with the *Great Barrier* . . . the cultural and historical barrier that stands between us and them. How desperately we want to hear what Isaiah had to say to us, but we stand at a distance. When it comes to studying the Prophets, the distance is literary as well. What *is* a prophetic book? Why are there so many of them in the Old Testament? How are they organized? These issues were transparent to the ancient Israelites, but they are a whole new realm for us.

Real Time and Space

Let's start with what the prophetic books are. What books can you expect to find in the Old Testament? The technical term is the "canon." Out of the many written psalms, recorded histories, and preached oracles, these are the pieces that the community of faith identify as inspired by God and therefore having authority over the people of God. The Greek word *kanōn* derives from a word meaning "reed," or "bar" and came to mean "ruler," or "measuring stick"—the idea is that these books, and these alone, have been

WEEK ONE

measured and found worthy of sacred status. The Protestant Christian canon of the Old Testament includes the same list of books as the Jewish canon, but organizes them differently. In this collection, the writing “Prophets” are gathered into one “file folder,” and placed in their perceived chronological order. (See figure 1.)

Hebrew Bible	Christian Old Testament
<p>The Law (<i>Torah</i>): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy</p>	<p>The Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy</p>
<p>The Prophets (<i>Nevi'im</i>): Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi</p>	<p>The Historical Books: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther</p>
<p>The Writings (<i>Ketuvim</i>): Psalms, Proverbs, Job, The Five Scrolls: Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, 1 & 2 Chronicles</p>	<p>Poetry & Wisdom: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon</p>
	<p>The Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi</p>
<p>The Apocrypha <i>A final collection of books sometimes included in the Bible is known as the Apocrypha. Some of this collection is included in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox canons, but it was excluded from the Protestant and Jewish canons. The word itself means “secret” or “obscure,” and the title comes from the fact that the authorship of the books is either unknown or considered spurious. These books include: Tobit, Judith, Additions to Esther, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus (Wisdom of ben Sirach), Baruch, Additions to Daniel, 1 & 2 Maccabees.</i></p>	

Figure 1.

DAY ONE

Meet the Prophets

First Contact

What do you think of when you hear the word *prophet*? What about someone like Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King Jr. or Billy Graham? Why do you think America has identified these leaders as prophets? How does a society respond to individuals with these sorts of gifts?

Into the Book

Open up the table of contents of your Bible. If your Bible is like mine, the listing of the Old Testament books takes up a single page. Scan through the books' titles. If you dare, put a colored dot or dash or even underline every one of the books you think belongs to the prophets. How many have you found? How would you categorize them? Are there some that are much longer than others?

Now find the book of Isaiah. Where does his book fall in the list? Why do you think it was placed there?

Now turn in your Bible to the book of Isaiah. What is the page number of the opening chapter?

Flip through the book. How many chapters are in it?

Keeping a bookmark at Isaiah 1, go back to your table of contents and find the book of Hosea. Go to that page. Flip through that book and count how many chapters it has. Keep flipping pages until you hit the book of Micah. How many chapters there? How would you account for the differing lengths of these books?

Now read the opening verse of the book of Isaiah, the book of Hosea, and the book of Micah. Write here what is common between the opening verses of each of these books.

Real People, Real Places, Real Faith

As we will learn in our first lesson, the books of the prophets are not biographies of the prophets themselves. Rather, they are collections of the prophets' sermons. Sometimes these sermons are the result of visions they had seen, experiences they'd had, or a direct word they'd heard from God and been commanded to speak. Each of the prophets was a *very* public figure. They spoke to the nation, and most expressly to the king. Their job was to confront the people of Israel when they were failing to keep their covenant with God. When Israel broke that covenant, the leaders of the nation were *supposed* to lead them back. When the leaders didn't, the prophets launched. And boy, did they launch. Note that each of the prophets identifies his tenure by the kings under which he served. Take a moment to find and circle Isaiah's kings on the time line below.

Our People, Our Places, Our Faith

Have you ever been involved in a Christian community where corruption has been allowed to continue unchecked? Or have you as an outsider ever *watched* while a supposedly Christian community abused the voiceless?



PATRIARCHAL PERIOD

Down into Egypt with Joseph & the Tribes

c. 1850 (c. 1700)
HYKOS PERIOD IN EGYPT - c. 1650-1550

Eden
[?]

Noah
[?]

Abraham/Isaac/Jacob
c. 2000 BCE (c. 1850)

UNITED MONARCHY

Saul / David / Solomon
c. 1050 - 931

Samuel
Era of the Judges
c. 1400 (c. 1250)

Joshua & the Conquest
Desert Wanderings
40 years

Sinai
1446 (c. 1275)

CONQUEST & SETTLEMENT



EXODUS



DIVIDED

MONARCHY

931 BCE

Jeroboam
931

The Omrides
885-841
Ahab
Elijah
MOABITE STONE - c. 840 BCE

Dynasty of Jehu
841-745

Series of assassinations
745-722

ASSYRIAN DESTRUCTION (SHALMANESER V)

Jeroboam II
Hosea & Amos
SYRO-PHRAIMITE WARS
734-732

722 BCE

ASSYRIA FALLS TO BABYLON - 612 BCE
EGYPT DEFEATED AT CARCHEMISH - 605 BCE

ISRAEL

Rehoboam I
931

Jehoshaphat
869
Uzziah
767

Ahaz
735

Hezekiah
715
Manasseh
686

Josiah
639

Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin
1st Deportation
609-597

Jeremiah >
Nahum

Jeremiah >
Nahum

JUDAH

Hasmoneans
152-64 BCE

Alexander
336 BCE

Rebuilding the Temple
538-516

Edict of Cyrus
538

70 yrs.

Zedekiah
597-586 BCE

< Jeremiah
Ezekiel
Daniel

2ND TEMPLE JUDAISM

THE RETURN THE EXILE

BABYLON FALLS TO MEDO-PERSIAN EMPIRE - 539 BCE

Malachi

Haggai & Zechariah

Isaiah >
Micah

Isaiah >

Isaiah >

Isaiah >

Isaiah >

Isaiah >

BABYLONIAN DESTRUCTION (NEBUCHADNEZZAR)



What *is* a prophetic book? Why are there so many of them in the Old Testament? How are they organized? These issues were transparent to the ancient Israelites, but they are a whole new realm for us.

A historical example of a faith community that delayed in confronting evil would be the Catholic Church and their sale of indulgences in the Middle Ages. Indulgences were payments that served as an aspect of penance designed to absolve people from their sins. The corruption of this practice matured to the point where priests were leveraging the poor by their fear of hell to give more and more money to the pope's building projects. One Catholic leader, Johann Tetzel, became famous for his slogan: "As soon as a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs." Martin Luther, a Catholic priest, stood up against this practice in his Ninety-Five Theses, which triggered the Reformation. His courage bought him excommunication from the Catholic Church—but it freed the community of faith from this despicable practice. A voice like Martin Luther's is critical to the health of the church. But the price of *being* a Martin Luther is high. Who have you known in your lifetime who paid the price for speaking up?

DAY TWO

Meet a Prophet

First Contact

Take a moment to identify one injustice in your world that rankles in your soul. Big or small, something that touches you directly or not. Something as small as politics at your office or as big as human trafficking. Now ask yourself these questions: (1) Why does that injustice exist? (2) Who benefits from it? (3) Who is victimized by it? (4) Why doesn't someone confront it? (5) If someone *could* confront it, who would that person have to be to have a voice and make an impact?

Into the Book

Meet a prophet. The year is somewhere in the early tenth century BCE. The system of monarchy in Israel is still brand-new. Mature King David is at the height of his career: he has succeeded where Saul has failed—Israel's perennial enemies, the Philistines, have finally been beaten back; the nations of Moab, Aram, and Edom are subjugated. In other words, for the first time in Israel's history, the boundaries promised to Abraham have

WEEK ONE

been secured and the kingdom of God is safe. Also significant, David has been wise enough to move the tabernacle to the capital city, Jerusalem—as it should be. In addition, in 2 Samuel 7 the prophet Nathan prophesied to David that God was giving him an eternal dynasty. Through this prophet David was assured that his son would reign after him and have the honor of building a temple for Yahweh. All in all, David is sitting pretty. He is strong and secure upon his throne, he has his prophet Nathan at his side, and in his world the word of the king is the word of law. Well, that would be in any *other* nation the word of the king was law . . .

Read 2 Samuel 11.

- Complete the chart below.

David's Crime (11:1-5)	David's (Attempted) Cover-Up (11:6-13)	David's Conspiracy & 2nd Crime (11:14-25)	David's Consolation (11:26-27)
<p>Who are the characters involved? Who is Uriah the Hittite? (cf. 2 Sam. 23:8-38)</p> <p>What were David's crimes?</p>	<p>David tries twice to cover up his crime. What does he do?</p> <p>What do we learn about Uriah and his character in these verses?</p>	<p>What does David command regarding Uriah?</p> <p>What is the outcome?</p>	<p>What happens with Uriah's wife?</p>

Real People, Real Places, Real Faith

As we have just seen, Nathan is David's court prophet. As such, he is a familiar face in David's palace. In fact, it was he who spoke the oracle in 2 Samuel 7, in which David was promised his eternal kingship and his secure reign. At that point, David *should* see Nathan as a loyal adviser. But things are about to change.

Power has corrupted, and David has committed an unimaginable sequence of crimes. As a result, the prophet in me would want to let him have it. But David is at the height of his power; he has proven he is willing to commit murder to cover up his indiscretions and that others are willing to help him carry out his cover-ups. As a result, David is effectively insulated against the consequences of his unscrupulous actions.

Now let's put ourselves in Nathan's sandals. In 2 Samuel 12:1 the Lord sends Nathan to confront David—in public, in his own throne room, in front of his own soldiers. If you were Nathan, how would you be feeling now? Write out a brief list of what you think Nathan might be thinking and feeling. Who would have the *authority* and *courage* to confront this king about his crime? Write up a brief job description of who this person would have to be.

Our People, Our Places, Our Faith

Think about our world leaders today, and the corruption that seems organically connected to power. What are the consequences of unchecked power? Richard Nixon and Watergate, the Hooker Chemical Company and Love Canal, Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky, the Bank of America and mortgage fraud. Who, if anyone, in our world today has the authority to confront these wealthy and powerful people and compel them to behave correctly? And where do we get a standard of what is *correct*? How different would our world be if every nation had a Nathan among their top echelon of leaders? Take one of the scenarios just named and rewrite it with a Nathan in the mix.

DAY THREE

The Prophet's Authority

First Contact

A famous quotation often credited to Edmund Burke states: “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” At first blush, all of us affirm this. But what if you happen to be the good man who is being call upon to do something?

Into the Book

In Israel's world *Yahweh* was truly the king of the country, and the prophets were among several human officers who carried out his will. So in this story, we find that it is the prophet Samuel who *hears* God's word for the country and who *carries it out*. *The prophet is the spokesman of Yahweh himself*, and to our great surprise, the human prophet has authority over the human king. Take a look at your time line and find Samuel. You will notice that he falls between the Era of the Judges and the United Monarchy. Samuel was the last judge of Israel, and also a prophet. In the narrative in 1 Samuel 8, we find that “the elders of Israel” came to Samuel, demanding that he appoint a king

DAY THREE

over Israel to rule over them so they could be “like all the [other] nations.” After seeking Yahweh, Samuel listened to their request. In today’s study we will read about Samuel’s role in selecting and appointing the first kings of Israel, Saul and David. Here we will witness the prophet acting as “king-maker” and “king-breaker.”

Read 1 Samuel 9:1–17; 10:1–13; 15:1–31; and 16:1–13.

- Who are the characters involved in the readings in chapters 9 and 10? List them here.
- What did Yahweh tell Samuel to do (9:15–17)?
- What two things does Samuel do to Saul to announce him as king (10:1)?
- What does Yahweh through Samuel command Saul to do to the Amalekites (15:1–3)?
- In what way does Saul disobey Yahweh’s command (15:7–25)?
- What is the result of Saul’s disobedience (15:26)?
- What does Samuel do and announce to Saul (15:27–29)?
- To whom does Yahweh send Samuel after Saul’s rejection as king (16:1)?
- What does Samuel do to David (16:12)?
- In God’s government, who has the authority to “make” and “break” kings?

Real People, Real Places, Real Faith

Even though Samuel was Yahweh's prophet and spokesperson, he was still human, and he still experienced real feelings and real fears. In the passage for today, we get a glimpse into Samuel's feelings about going to find Saul's replacement. In 1 Samuel 16:2 Samuel said to Yahweh, "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me" (NRSV). In response, Yahweh told him exactly what to do, and we are told that "Samuel did what the LORD commanded" (1 Sam. 16:4 NRSV). If you had been Samuel, do you think you would have responded in the same way? If not, how would you have responded?

Our People, Our Places, Our Faith

"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." Of course we all affirm this, and none of us would ever choose to be the good person who chose to do nothing in the face of injustice. But as we've seen, even champions of the faith can look into the eyes of injustice and feel fear. Thought for the day: Fear is not a mark of cowardice. But, fear that keeps us from at least attempting to do what we know is right, *that* is cowardice.

DAY FOUR

The Concept of Covenant and the Ten Commandments

First Contact

Have you ever been asked to memorize the Ten Commandments? If asked now, would you be able to recite them? How about five of them? How about the first one? Have you ever wondered why the first one is the first one?

Into the Book

When Yahweh established his relationship with Israel at Sinai, he did so by means of a “covenant” or in Hebrew, a *bērit*. In this covenant Yahweh would be Israel’s sovereign Lord, or “suzerain,” and Israel would be his subject nation, or “vassal.” As Yahweh’s vassal, Israel was identified as Yahweh’s

people, gifted with the Promised Land, and expected to give unquestioned loyalty to Yahweh and his law. If Israel kept her commitments, she would keep the Promised Land and all the blessings that came with it. If Israel refused to keep the covenant, she would lose the Promised Land and experience all the atrocities of war and exile (see Richter 2008, 69–91).

Today we will look at the covenant that Yahweh made with Israel at Sinai found in Exodus 20. This is a chapter of the Old Testament you already know very well, even if you don't know that you know it very well. This is the Ten Commandments!

Read Exodus 20:1–21.

- Who does Yahweh say that he is?
- What does Yahweh say that he had done?
- What is the first commandment Yahweh gives to Israel? What does this communicate about the relationship between Yahweh and Israel?
- After establishing who he is, what obligations or expectations does Yahweh place on Israel? Underline them or list them here.

Now read Deuteronomy 27:11–28:68, focusing on 28:1–2, 15, 58–68.

- What does Yahweh promise if the Israelites obey his commandments?
- What does he promise if they do not obey his commandments?

Suzerain: *A king or state that exercises dominion over a lesser king or state.*

Vassal: *A king or state that owes allegiance to and is dependent upon a more powerful king or state.*

Real People, Real Places, Real Faith

If one were to distill all the promises of God's covenant to Israel into a single statement, it would be: "If you accept this covenant and remember to obey, you will keep the land and all the good blessings that come with it, but if you violate this covenant and disobey, you will lose the land and all its good blessings." If you are like me, reading Deuteronomy 28:58–68 makes your palms begin to sweat. Moreover, how could God do all these things to people he loves? But if you look at this passage carefully, what you really see is not God *acting* against his people, but God *allowing* others to act against them. The consequences listed here in the curses of the Sinai covenant all involve the natural results of conquest by an enemy nation. In other words, the curse of this covenant is that God will remove his hand of protection from Israel. And as Israel only stands through his strength . . . they will fall. And fall hard they will.

Our People, Our Places, Our Faith

Often my students ask me, "How could the Israelites have been so stupid to just *ignore* the covenant? Didn't they know what was at stake?!" The answer is yes, of course they knew what was at stake. But they had managed to redefine and rationalize these Ten Commandments and their own behavior so it no longer seemed to them they were disobeying anything. Any similarities between Israel and us?

DAY FIVE

Isaiah, the Fifth Gospel

First Contact

We said in the introduction that the prophet Isaiah is quoted more than any other Old Testament prophet in the New Testament. So much so that some call his book the “fifth gospel.” It seems that the New Testament writers leaned heavily upon their Old Testament mentor in their formulation of who this first-century prophet from Galilee might be. Can you think of a passage in the New Testament where Isaiah is quoted?

Into the Book

Read John 12. The chapter takes us from a celebratory dinner at the house of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha, through what we know as Palm Sunday to just before the Last Supper. In this chapter Jesus is dealing with his growing fame—which results in Jesus being unable to eat a meal with his friends without the paparazzi showing up (vv. 1–11)! Even more interesting, somehow Jesus has become the symbol of someone else’s rebellion

DAY FIVE

(vv. 12–19). As a result, people from all over the world are coming to find out what all the uproar is about (vv. 20–36). Our focus is verses 37–50.

- According to John, what had Jesus done that *should* have inspired belief (vv. 37–38)?
- To whom does the gospel writer (John himself) turn to make sense of the continuing disbelief of Jesus' audience (vv. 38–41)?

Let's track down John's citations. Turn to Isaiah 52:13–53:12. Isaiah 53:1 is our focus.

- Of whom is the prophet Isaiah speaking?
- Whose report does the audience not believe?
- How does the prophet Isaiah explain the situation John was experiencing? In other words, a crowd who had seen the Christ perform miracles but would not believe? (We'll get back to this passage later in the study.)

Now turn to Isaiah 6:1–10. This is known as Isaiah's "call narrative," where the prophet was called into the ministry. Verse 10 is our focus.

- Who is calling Isaiah into service in this passage?
- Where is Isaiah getting his message?
- How will the people of God respond?
- What parallels do you see between this passage in Isaiah and John's confusion in John 12?

Real People, Real Places, Real Faith

Often it is hard for us to think of the people in the Bible as *real* people. So the idea that Isaiah might have been intimidated by his calling, that John might have struggled with doubt or confusion, that Jesus might have felt overwhelmed at the task ahead of him . . . these things are hard to wrap our minds around. But these *were* real people. John had, of course, anticipated that *every* Jew would respond to Jesus' message and follow with joy. Rome would be defeated, and a son of David would be restored to Israel's emancipated throne. But that's not how it happened. And so Isaiah's ancient message of a Messiah who would suffer, and a crowd who would reject and defy, became incredibly important to our New Testament writers as they strove to understand and explain the mission of their Messiah, who chose death instead of conquest. It was Isaiah's clear vision that helped John to see that Jesus' ultimate mission was a sacrifice that once and for all would break the power of sin, and death, and hell.

Our People, Our Places, Our Faith

Isaiah and John remind us that too often the people of God have refused to believe the real message of their God—that we have been blind to his true objectives in our lives. The people of Jesus' day had already figured out what *they* wanted in a Messiah, but God had other plans. Check your heart right now. Is there some prayer you are praying in which you've already got it all figured out; you know exactly what God should do? Let us ask that our eyes might be opened, our heart awakened to his plan . . . instead of ours.