

**OneBook.**

THE EPIC  
OF EDEN

# JONAH



SANDRA L. RICHTER

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Printed in the United States of America

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*Cover design by Strange Last Name  
Page design by PerfecType, Nashville, Tennessee*

**Richter, Sandra L.**

The epic of Eden : Jonah / Sandra L. Richter. – Franklin, Tennessee : Seedbed Publishing, ©2019.

pages ; cm. + 1 videodisc – (OneBook)

An eight-week study of the book of Jonah.

ISBN 9781628246865 (pbk.)

ISBN 9781628246902 (DVD)

ISBN 9781628246872 (mobipocket ebk.)

ISBN 9781628246889 (epub ebk.)

ISBN 9781628246896 (updf ebk.)

1. Bible. Jonah – Textbooks. 2. Bible. Jonah – Study and teaching. 3. Bible. Jonah – Commentaries.  
I. Title. II. Series.

BS1605.55.R52 2019

224./920071

2019941783



SEEDBED PUBLISHING  
Franklin, Tennessee  
seedbed.com

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## WEEK ONE

# Introduction

What typically comes to mind when you think about the book of Jonah? A children's story? A fable? A legend? Or maybe it is the kids' camp song—"Who did, who did, who did, who did, who did swallow Jo-Jo-Jonah?" Most likely, what comes to your mind is a story that you've heard so many times, there could not be anything else you could possibly learn from it. Well, this study is written to prove that assumption oh so wrong! Here we have the account of a professional holy man. Someone who has spent his life and career in ministry, but who himself has not yet fully understood his own calling. Here is a lifer in the faith, who's about to have his very predictable God turn him on his head with an assignment he could never have imagined. In the words of VeggieTales creator Phil Vischer, this is a prophet who did not get the point!

If we move from the pew to the academy, we find that many interpret the book of Jonah as an allegory. For those who take this latter course, the standard read is that Jonah is representative of Israel, the whale is the nation of Babylonia who swallowed up Israel in the exile, and the trip to Nineveh is the conversion of the Gentile world that resulted from the dispersion of the Jews out of Babylon. (That would be the part about the whale vomiting Jonah up on the shore!) One of the great early church fathers, Augustine, had a more Christian take on the allegory: "As, therefore, Jonah passed from the ship to the belly of the whale, so Christ passed from the cross to the sepulcher, or

into the abyss of death. And as Jonah suffered this for the sake of those who were endangered by the storm, so Christ suffered for the sake of those who are tossed on the waves of this world.”\*

Often folks read Jonah as a parable. Like the parable of the good Samaritan in the New Testament, the idea is that the prophet’s audience is being taught to love their enemies, the narrowness of their nationalism is exposed, and God’s universal goals for evangelism and conversion are revealed. Although these lessons are clearly present in Jonah’s story, identifying the book as a parable also identifies it as intentional fiction—a problem for those who are also identifying Jonah as a historical figure. The phrase “popular legend” is also used in the study of the book. There are several reasons for this, not the least being that, hey, there’s a guy *swallowed* by a *whale* in here!

But there is another much more biased reason for the reputation of fable, allegory, parable, and legend that often accompanies Jonah’s book—and that is the perception that although the book *claims* to be from the eighth century BCE, its message to step outside the narrow boundaries of nationalism and reach out to one’s enemies is too advanced for an eighth-century Israel, and therefore the book must actually be from the fourth or fifth centuries. Why the fourth or fifth centuries? Because this is the era following Israel’s return from the exile. And many would say it was the exile that dismantled Israel’s own sense of nationalism and put them into direct contact with their enemies. In other words, some conclude that the global vision of the book could not possibly have been penned in Israel prior to the exile.

But the God of the Bible is very much in the practice of challenging his people with counter-cultural messages that call them to be more than they think they can be . . . to stretch them further, push them harder, so that God’s people can be more like him and less like this world we find ourselves in. So if you actually believe that God can do such things (challenge his people to reach beyond their cultural comfort zone), it is not necessary to

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\*Augustine, *Letters of St. Augustine* 102.34. Quoted in Phillip Cary, *Jonah*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), 71.



*In Judaism, the book of Jonah is the Haftorah for the afternoon of Yom Kippur. A “Haftorah” is an assigned reading from the Prophets that follows the Torah reading at each Sabbath celebration and on Jewish festivals and fast days. Yom Kippur is the day of national repentance and forgiveness in Judaism. Why Jonah? Because it speaks to God’s willingness to forgive anyone who is willing to repent.*

write the message of the book of Jonah off as a late and evolved creation of a post-exilic author. Rather, we find ourselves (in the midst of our own narrow biases) being challenged with the same message as eighth-century Israel—to move out of our comfort zone and embrace God’s global vision for this world he created. So this is our goal for this study—to take the message of this book at face value, and listen for the voice of God. Why? So that Jesus will not have to say of us what he said of his own generation—that the Ninevites did better than us (see Matthew 12:41; Luke 11:32).

## How Is This Going to Work?

If your group has already worked through an *Epic of Eden* study, you’re already pros. If not, here’s the plan. The study revolves around a DVD/downloaded set of seven, approximately half-hour studies with Dr. Sandy Richter. These are designed to be viewed during group time once per week. The second component is a study guide for each of your group members that includes three individual studies per week—these are to be done at home whenever it fits an individual’s schedule. In addition, the study guide will include all of the biblical passages discussed in each study. The third component is a brief leader’s guide designed to help the leader to structure the group time. (You’ll find this on page 125.) The idea is that each member will be working at home at their own pace on the three weekly studies. Do as much or as little as your schedule permits. No pressure, really. Once per week your group will gather to view the filmed

## WEEK ONE

study, talk about the individual work from the week, and focus on some group discussion questions. Our recommendation is that you set apart the first gathering to simply meet each other, drink some coffee and have some snacks, get your books, watch the introductory video, and make sure everyone is clear on the plan. It might also be wise to set apart a final gathering to debrief, ask and answer final questions, and conclude your time as a group.

Got it? Got it! Let the adventure begin!

## WEEK TWO

# What Is a Prophet?

### A Word from the Author

As we consider plunging into the well-known book of Jonah, 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 God wants to say to us through Jonah, but we stand at a distance. When it comes to studying the Prophets, the distance is not only historical and cultural, it 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. The technical term for the books that have been identified by the community of faith (past and present) as belonging in the Old Testament is the word *canon*. Out of the many psalms and proverbs put to parchment, the histories written, and the oracles preached, the canon includes the pieces that the community of faith identify as inspired by God and therefore have the “authority of faith and practice” over the people of God. The Greek word *kanōn* derives from a word meaning “reed” or “bar”

WEEK TWO

and came to mean “ruler” or “measuring stick”—the idea is that these books, and these alone, have been 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 the Protestant canon, the writing Prophets are gathered into one file folder and placed in their perceived chronological order. [See figure 1.]

Hebrew Bible	Protestant Christian Old Testament
<p><b>The Law (<i>Torah</i>):</b> Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy</p>	<p><b>The Pentateuch:</b> Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy</p>
<p><b>The Prophets (<i>Nevi'im</i>):</b> Joshua, Judges, 1 &amp; 2 Samuel, 1 &amp; 2 Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, <b>Jonah</b>, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi</p>	<p><b>The Historical Books:</b> Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 &amp; 2 Samuel, 1 &amp; 2 Kings, 1 &amp; 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther</p>
<p><b>The Writings (<i>Ketuvim</i>):</b> Psalms, Proverbs, Job The Five Scrolls: Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, 1 &amp; 2 Chronicles</p>	<p><b>Poetry &amp; Wisdom:</b> Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon</p>
	<p><b>The Prophets:</b> Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, <b>Jonah</b>, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi</p>
<p><b>The Apocrypha:</b> <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 the book of Esther, the Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus [Wisdom of ben Sirach], Baruch, additions to the book of Daniel, 1 &amp; 2 Maccabees.</i></p>	
<p><b>Figure 1.</b></p>	

## DAY ONE

# Meet the Prophets

### First Contact

If someone were to ask you to name three prophets found in the Bible, could you do it? Five? List the first ones that come to mind. Jot down two pieces of information (or passages) that you know about each of them.

### 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 titles of the books. If you dare, put a colored dot or dash or underline every book you think belongs to the Prophets. How many have you found? Are there some that are much longer than others?

- Now find the book of Jonah. Where does this book fall in the list? Why do you think Jonah's book was placed where it is?
- Now actually turn in your Bible to the book of Jonah. What is the page number of the opening chapter?

WEEK TWO

- Flip through the book. How many chapters are in it?
- Keep flipping until you reach the book of Micah. How many pages are there in the book of Micah? How many chapters?
- Keeping a bookmark at Jonah 1, go back to your table of contents and find the book of Isaiah. Go to that page. Flip through that book. How many chapters do you find there?
- Keep flipping pages until you hit the book of Jeremiah. How many chapters are there? Any ideas as to why these books are so vastly different in length?
- Now read the opening verse of the book of Jonah, the opening verse of the book of Isaiah, and the opening verse of the book of Micah. Write here what is common between the opening verses of each of these books.
- What do you notice about the opening of Jonah that differs from Isaiah and Micah?

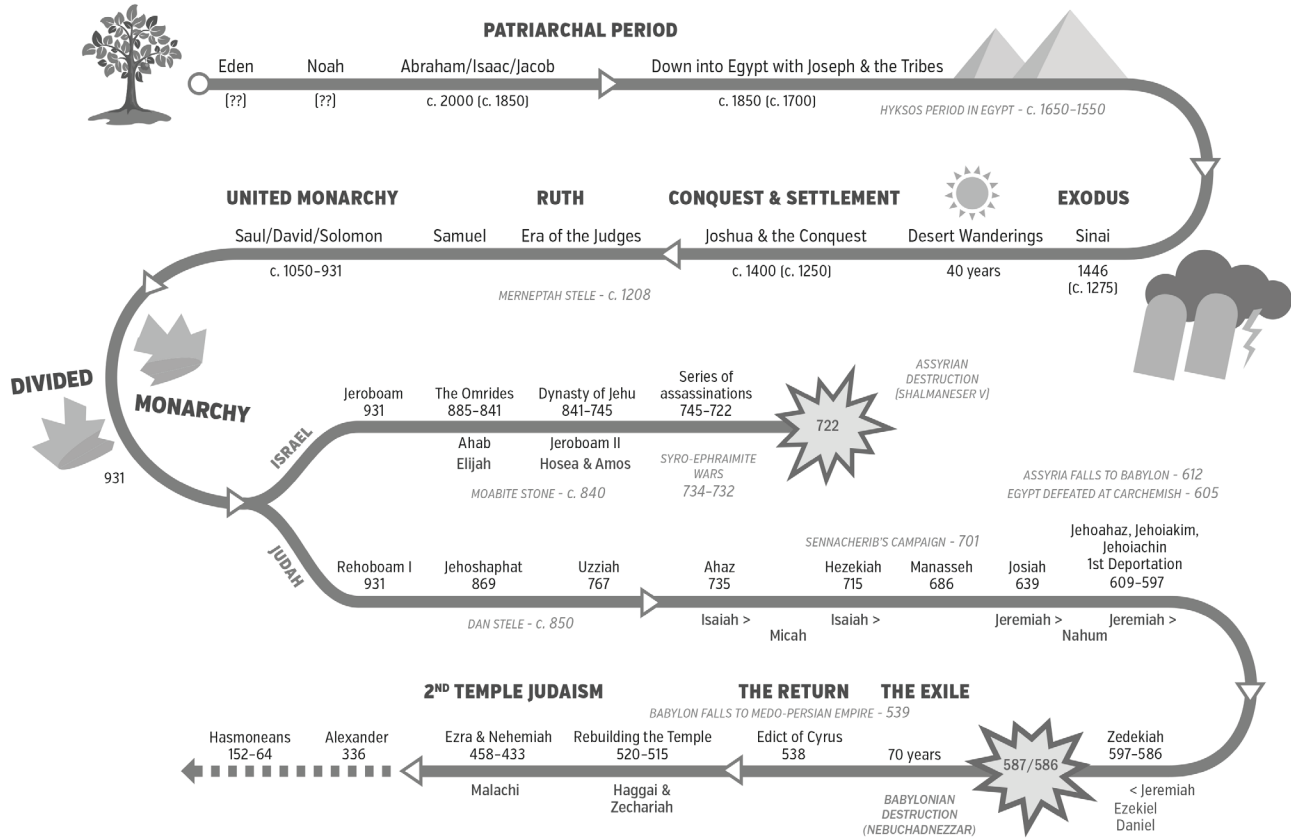
Jonah	Isaiah	Micah
<p>Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." [ESV]</p>	<p>The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. [ESV]</p>	<p>The word of the LORD that came to Micah of Moresheth in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem. [ESV]</p>

## Real People, Real Places, Real Faith

As we will learn in our first lesson, the books of the Prophets are not typically biographies of the prophets themselves. Rather, they are collections of the prophets' sermons. Sometimes these sermons are the result of visions they have seen, experiences they have had, or a direct word they heard from God and have been commanded to speak. Each of the prophets was a *very* public figure. They spoke to the nation and most expressly to the king. Ultimately, 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 prophet launched. And boy did he launch. Note that each of Jonah's contemporaries identifies their tenure as prophet by the kings under which they served. The book of Jonah is the exception. We hear nothing of Jonah's king(s) in the *book* of Jonah, rather we find out about Jonah's tenure via the book of Kings. This is Israel's national history. And in 2 Kings 14:23–29 we read that Jonah is a northern prophet, who ministered during the reign of one of the Northern Kingdom's most famous kings, Jeroboam II. Read that passage, and take a moment to find and circle Jonah's king on the following time line.

## Our People, Our Places, Our Faith

Communities are complicated. Whether you are dealing with a family, a school system, a city, a state, or a nation. It seems that human communities in this fallen world of ours are always a mixed bag of the good, the bad, and the ugly. In my younger years, I was a complete and committed idealist. I truly believed that good people were always good, bad people were always bad, and life came in black and white. As the years have gone by I've realized that there's an awful lot of gray out there. You can be privileged to have your kids enrolled in a *great* school system and still wind up with the one teacher left in the mix who is a miserable, bitter old woman who clearly wishes she were anywhere else but educating your precious



All dates are BCE.



kindergartner. You can be a young professional paddling hard in the midst of the shark tank that you call your first job, knowing full well that the higher-ups are a hot mess, and in the midst of a desperate moment find out that there is one higher-up who is not only every inch an honest human being but totally goes to bat for you at great personal price. Equally, you can find yourself working for a Christian institution with a great reputation and find out that the folks who actually run the show are so turf-hungry that they will do anything to keep a good man (or a good idea) down. Or maybe you find yourself the citizen of a nation that is filled with dangerous ideals, self-serving politicians, graft and lies, and then out of the blue comes a Mr. Smith (that would be Jimmy Stewart's role in the 1939 *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*), or an MLK, or an Elizabeth Warren (outspoken senior senator from Massachusetts), who, whatever their personal faults, totally puts themselves out there to make a difference.

And then you realize that David Mamet is wrong, old age and treachery will *not* always beat out youth and exuberance. And then tired and battle-scarred, you do it again—you take a stand. You tell yourself again that even in the midst of a system that seems completely broken *someone* has to be willing to make small moves against the darkness, even if it appears that their investment is doomed from the start.

Friends, this is what a prophet is. Are they always heard? Heck no. Do they pay a price for bucking the system? Absolutely. Are they written off as unrealistic hippy do-gooders or angry old/young men? Yes. Do they blow it themselves sometimes? Right there as well. But if justice and healing are ever going to see the light of day, we the people of God have got to be willing to live into the complexities of community with a commitment of *being* and *doing* right even when it hurts and we are vilified for it. Giving up is simply not an option.

## DAY TWO

# The Authority of the Prophet

### First Contact

Have you ever heard of an *orbuculum*? That is the technical word for a “crystal ball.” How many times have you heard someone say, “If I had a crystal ball . . .” Considering the fact that folk as diverse as Diane Wood, Bob Kahn, and Michael Jordan have famous quotes citing the idiom, probably a bunch of times! As far as we know crystal balls were first utilized by the Celtic Druids, but gained so much influence over the centuries that during the Elizabethan period they were used to advise kings. Their function? To divine the future. To move human sight beyond its own finite limitations to see the other side. Hmmm . . . no wonder so many people seem to want one.

### Into the Book

Today’s study takes us into the book of Deuteronomy. Here we find the nation of Israel’s legislation regarding the office of the prophet. And here we will find Yahweh’s answer to the human desire for a crystal ball.

## Deuteronomy 18:9-22

<sup>9</sup>When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. <sup>10</sup>Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, <sup>11</sup>or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. <sup>12</sup>Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD; because of these same detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you. <sup>13</sup>You must be blameless before the LORD your God.

<sup>14</sup>The nations you will dispossess listen to those who practice sorcery or divination. But as for you, the LORD your God has not permitted you to do so. <sup>15</sup>The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him. <sup>16</sup>For this is what you asked of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, “Let us not hear the voice of the LORD our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die.”

<sup>17</sup>The LORD said to me: “What they say is good. <sup>18</sup>I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him. <sup>19</sup>I myself will call to account anyone who does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name. <sup>20</sup>But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, is to be put to death.”

<sup>21</sup>You may say to yourselves, “How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the LORD?” <sup>22</sup>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, so do not be alarmed.

- Read verse 9 in several different versions if possible. How are the practices of the other nations described?

- In verses 10–14, underline the practices that the Israelites are *not* to imitate. (If you don't know what these words mean, take a quick look on Google.)
- In verses 15–20, whose words will be in the mouth of the prophet?
- Who do you think “me” is in verse 15?
- What will happen to those who do not pay attention to the words that the prophet speaks? Why is Yahweh so harsh about this command?

## Real People, Real Places, Real Faith

Divine intermediaries, or mediators between the gods and humans, were well-known throughout the ancient Near East. As you'll hear in our video, people desperate to hear from the gods sought to communicate by means of omens (anything utilized to foreshadow the future). Omens could be observed in random events or actively solicited. A *random* event that may portend a future event could be something like an abnormal birth in the flock (a two-headed lamb, for instance). A *solicited* omen might be communication sought by means of “incubation” (sleeping in a holy site to obtain a holy dream) or extispicy (analyzing the entrails of a sacrificed animal), or astrology (observing the paths of the stars).

In the ancient world, kings would consult divine intermediaries regarding important decisions such as military campaigns, building projects, appointing civil servants, et cetera. The prophet Ezekiel alludes to this regarding the king of Babylon: “For the king of Babylon [Nebuchadnezzar] stands at the parting of the way, at the head of the two ways, to use divination; he shakes the arrows, he consults the household idols, he looks at the liver” (21:21 NASB). The story of the king of Moab hiring the local soothsayer

Balaam to read entrails on four mountains for a divination fee communicates similar methodology (see Numbers 22–23).

So obviously, seeking to hear from the gods by means of a dead animal's lungs and liver, shaking arrows, or reading the stars probably sounds very silly to us. But imagine *you* are one of those desperate souls needing a word from the gods and this is the only way you know how to get your god to speak. All of a sudden, rather than sounding silly, it now sounds very, very sad.

## Our People, Our Places, Our Faith

In my many years of teaching and ministry, I have observed firsthand how desperately God's people want to hear from him. Over the years I've met hundreds at altars in camps and conferences, in my office or at a table in a café, who were asking for prayer, guidance, a word from their God. In today's study God promises Israel that he has no intention of concealing his will or requiring his people to *pay* someone else to find it for them. Instead, God promises that he will speak clearly to his people through his prophet. *And* the community of faith made sure that the most important of these words would be written down for subsequent generations. You and I are that subsequent generation, and our Bibles have preserved the words of the prophets for our guidance and our aid. As a result, there is *always* guidance for the believer in the Book. But there is also guidance for us through prayer. In this new covenant of ours, God has announced the impossible: that he has actually come to live within *every* believer (see Acts 2:1–4; Ephesians 2:19–22). *And* he has appointed leaders in this new covenant who can speak to us on his behalf (see 1 Corinthians 12:28–29). Moreover, we are told that “the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12), and Jesus himself has become our advocate such that we can “approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Heb. 4:16). In sum, in this new covenant, God actually *speaks* to the average, everyday believer and *we* can speak to him. So what is it you (the average, everyday believer) need to hear from God today? Why don't you pause now and tell him?

## DAY THREE

# The Prophet before Yahweh's Divine Council

### First Contact

Have you ever seen a preacher (either live or on TV) claim to know something God was speaking to someone else? Did you have confidence in that preacher's claim? Why or why not?

### Into the Book

In yesterday's study you read about divine intermediaries. Today we are with Isaiah as he encounters Yahweh's divine council and receives his commission to become a divine intermediary. We'll read the same story involving a certain Micaiah ben Imlah. And we are very interested in the fact that in Yahweh's government each of these encounters looks very different from what we might find in Canaanite religion.

DAY THREE

<p><b>Isaiah</b> <b>Isaiah 6:1-8 (NASB)</b></p>	<p><b>Micaiah ben Imlah</b> <b>1 Kings 22:19-23, 28 (NASB)</b></p>
<p><sup>1</sup>In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. <sup>2</sup>Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. <sup>3</sup>And one called out to another and said,</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">“Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory.”</p> <p><sup>4</sup>And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. <sup>5</sup>Then I said,</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">“Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.”</p> <p><sup>6</sup>Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. <sup>7</sup>He touched my mouth with it and said, “Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven.”</p> <p><sup>8</sup>Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?” Then I said, “Here am I. Send me!”</p>	<p><sup>19</sup>Micaiah said, “Therefore, hear the word of the LORD. I saw the LORD sitting on His throne, and all the host of heaven standing by Him on His right and on His left. <sup>20</sup>The LORD said, ‘Who will entice Ahab to go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?’ And one said this while another said that. <sup>21</sup>Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD and said, ‘I will entice him.’ <sup>22</sup>The LORD said to him, ‘How?’ And he said, ‘I will go out and be a deceiving spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.’ Then He said, ‘You are to entice him and also prevail. Go and do so.’ <sup>23</sup>Now therefore, behold, the LORD has put a deceiving spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; and the LORD has proclaimed disaster against you.”</p> <p><sup>28</sup>Micaiah said, “If you indeed return safely the LORD has not spoken by me.” And he said, “Listen, all you people.”</p>

WEEK TWO

<b>Isaiah</b> <b>Isaiah 6:1-8 (NASB)</b>	<b>Micaiah ben Imlah</b> <b>1 Kings 22:19-23, 28 (NASB)</b>
<p>What does Isaiah see and hear?</p> <p>What setting is described here? Where is Isaiah?</p> <p>What is Isaiah's response to what/who he sees?</p> <p>Why do you think the seraph touches Isaiah's mouth?</p> <p>What is Isaiah's response to Yahweh's call?</p>	<p>What does Micaiah see and hear?</p> <p>What setting is Micaiah describing?</p> <p>What is Micaiah's response to what he witnesses?</p> <p>Go back to the Deuteronomy passage you read on Day Two of this week and re-read especially verses 17-22. What similarity do you find in Micaiah's words?</p>

## Real People, Real Places, Real Faith

In the Canaanite divine council, the more powerful gods would argue out their plans for humanity in a free-for-all that involved debate, passion, and more than a bit of manipulation until a final ruling surfaced. In my classes I often compare this scene to a discussion on gun control at a family holiday meal. After the decision was made, for good or for ill, it was always the lowest-ranking god at the table who got the job of announcing the news to humanity.

In Yahweh's divine council this was *not* the case. There was no argument, no debate, no one-upmanship. Rather, Yahweh consulted his council and then made the decision himself (this would be the difference between monotheism and polytheism). And rather than a low-ranking deity being sent as the messenger of the gods, here the *human* prophet, who had been



caught up into the very presence of the divine council, who had heard the ruling with his very own ears, was commissioned to bring God's word to God's people. This was the ultimate source of the prophet's authority. The prophet was a divine emissary, not simply a human with a great sermon. He spoke on God's behalf as a diplomat communicates the will of his or her president. The populace ignored this message at their own peril.

## Our People, Our Places, Our Faith

Read Psalm 119:33–48 out loud. Let the words rest on you. Can you hear this author's hunger for the Word of God? Can you hear how the psalmist is *completely* convinced that the Word of God is his best hope and only defense against the vagaries of this world? This entire psalm, the longest in your Bible (176 verses!) recites in elegant poetic verse the believer's deepest need—the Word of God.

Do you share a fraction of the psalmist's conviction that the Word of God is the answer to your need? If not, ask the Holy Spirit who dwells within you to convince you of that truth. And pray for me while you're at it.