

Week 1: Introduction: Why Prophets?

Hook



Main Point: Old Testament prophets were messengers sent by God to call His people to repent.

Q: If you need advice about your finances, your marriage, your health, or your future – whom do you listen to?

Q: Whom in your life would you consider a complete authority on a specific subject?

We live in a world full of voices. Influencers. Podcasters. Commentators. Everyone has insight. Everyone claims authority. But that’s not new. In the 1690s, a London periodical called *The Athenian Mercury* launched what many consider the first advice column in history: “I Humbly Beg Your Speedy Answer.” The writers called themselves “The Athenians,” presenting themselves as a distinguished circle of enlightened experts, set apart from ordinary society.¹

In reality, the “experts” were the publisher and his two brothers-in-law.

People wrote asking for authoritative guidance on money, marriage, poetry, mathematics – even medical problems. Most of the advice sounded reasonable. But sometimes they got it terribly wrong. In one infamous case, they advised a young man to hide his crippling debt from his fiancée and, after marriage, use her assets to pay it off. Public outrage forced them to retract their counsel.²

People have always wanted authoritative voices. But not every confident voice speaks truth.

In the Old Testament, many claimed to speak for God. But true prophets didn’t tell people what they wanted to hear. They delivered the Word of the Lord despite its popularity – or unpopularity. And most of the time, the message was simple:

Repent. Turn back. Come home. And by the time Elijah steps onto the scene, Israel had plenty of “religious” voices – but almost none speaking the true word of the Lord.

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Deuteronomy 18:14–22 [Read]

Talking Point 1: God's true prophets speak only the word of God to His people.

Q: What comes to mind when you think of the word *prophet*?

Q: What is the difference between the prophets of the nations and God's prophets?

Q: How can God's people tell who is a true prophet sent from God?

In Hebrew, there are a few words for "prophet." *Nabi* is the most common and comes from the word meaning "to bubble up" as if from a fountain, figuratively describing a prophet receiving a message from God and sharing it with His people. *Ro'eh* and *chozeh* both mean "seer," referring to how prophets often received God's word in visions or dreams. In all cases, the biblical prophet is a messenger of God; he or she speaks God's Word and only His Word to His people. Many people today hear the word "prophet" and think of someone who tells the future, but that's not the biblical prophets' purpose. If it was part of the message, God revealed the future to them, but their primary purpose was to call God's people from disobedience to repentance.

In Deuteronomy 18, God addressed the abominable practices of the pagan nations that had been living in the Promised Land. They had their own "prophets" who practiced sorcery and divination, which God's people were not allowed to do. Magic is an attempt to get God to do what you want, but God's prophets told the people what God wanted them to do.

In the Old Testament world, "prophets" in every nation claimed to hear from the gods, so people would go to them for advice. In each nation, kings hired professional "prophets" as part of their royal team of counselors, but often those prophets just told them what they wanted to hear because they were being paid.³ Israel had professional prophets like the other nations, but God also raised up true prophets to speak hard truths to His people – to tell them how they were breaking His law and what would happen if they didn't repent. In the time of Jeremiah, the king had paid prophets who were telling him "deceptive words" that Jerusalem was invincible to destruction by Babylon because the temple was there, but Jeremiah told them the hard truth that they were about to be destroyed because of their unfaithfulness to God (Jeremiah 7). This is why many scholars call the prophets "covenant lawsuit mediators"; their role was to hold the people accountable for the ways they had broken God's covenant, both by not loving God and by not loving others.⁴

Often, the kings didn't want to hear those messages, so they persecuted the prophets, beating them, throwing them in prison, even killing them. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told His disciples they would be persecuted like the prophets before them because they also brought a message calling people to repentance (Matthew 5:12). Jesus also told a parable describing how God had sent prophets to His people, generation after generation, whom they had beaten and ignored. Then He finally sent His Son and, instead of finally listening, they killed Him (Matthew 21:33–43).

The story of God's people throughout the Old Testament is a repetitive cycle of their turning away from God and God's sending a prophet to call them to repentance, over and over again. Sometimes they heard the prophet's message and turned back to God, but more often, they didn't. Yet God continued to pursue His people, generation after generation.

The prophet's goal wasn't to condemn the people; it was to warn them. God doesn't want to punish His people; He wants them to repent, but He cannot let evil go unchecked (Exodus 34:6–7; Ezekiel 33:11). God's discipline isn't about punishment; it's about bringing people back to Him, back to a life of blessing, peace and joy. The prophets reveal both the seriousness of sin and the mercy of God. God is both the God of justice and the God of mercy; He holds these two things in tension together. The fact that this cycle continues shows us the deeper problem of the human heart and points us ahead to the need for a greater prophet who is not just a messenger from God but God Himself.

Q: If the prophet's role is to show God's people where they have been disobedient and call them to repentance, what might a prophet say to the modern Church?

Q: How have you seen God's direction or discipline in your life steer you closer to Him or His people?

Q: Romans 2:4 reminds us that it's His kindness that leads us to repentance. Do you see God's discipline in your life like a kindness?

1 Kings 16:29–34 [Read]

Talking Point 2: When God's people are not following Him, He sends a prophet.

Q: Who was king in Israel at this time? What was he like? Why might God send a prophet at this time?

At this point in Israel's history, the nation had been divided more than 50 years – into the Northern Kingdom (Israel) and the Southern Kingdom (Judah). When God's people first entered the land, they didn't have a human king; God Himself was their king. Instead, God used judges, a blend of prophets and military leaders. During the period of the judges, Israel went through a repeating cycle: They worshipped other gods; things didn't go well; they cried out to God; God sent a judge who delivered them from their

enemies; and they lived in peace until that judge died and the cycle began again. This went on for almost 400 years until the people asked for a human king (1 Samuel 8).

Once the monarchy began, they had Saul, then David, then Solomon, and then the kingdom split (1 Kings 12). The Southern Kingdom of Judah continued the line of David on their throne in Jerusalem, while Israel had a series of dynasties, often with violent takeovers. From the beginning of the Northern Kingdom, Jeroboam led the people in idolatry. To keep them from going to Jerusalem (in Judah) to worship, he built golden calves and said they were their gods who had brought them out of Egypt. Each king continued this false worship. But when Ahab came to the throne, Scripture says he did more evil than any who had come before him. He built a temple to Baal and a sacred pole for Asherah. Now not only were the people worshipping a false version of God, they were also worshipping Canaanite gods. This is why God sent the prophet Elijah.

There had been other prophets in Israel before Elijah. During Jeroboam's reign, the "man of God" from Judah prophesied against the altar at Bethel and foretold Josiah's future destruction of it, which wouldn't happen for almost 300 years (1 Kings 13:1–5). The prophet Ahijah condemned King Jeroboam's idolatry and foretold the destruction of his house (1 Kings 14:1–16). During Baasha's reign, Jehu pronounced judgment on him for continuing Jeroboam's sins (1 Kings 16:1–4). The kings of Israel had already received clear prophetic warnings from God about their idolatry, but at this point in 1 Kings, the prophets took center stage over the kings.

There were prophets preaching to the kings of Judah (Southern Kingdom), because they were also committing idolatry even though they believed themselves to be God's remnant because of the line of David and the temple. But Elijah and Elisha's ministry was just to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. At the time of Ahab, it had been almost 600 years since God had rescued His people from slavery in Egypt. Throughout that time, they had been unfaithful to God much more often than they had been faithful. Even during Israel's "golden age," David committed grievous sins, and Solomon's reign ended in idolatry (1 Kings 11:1–8). The overwhelming message of the Old Testament is that God's people could not keep His covenant; they could not stay faithful. Through another prophet, God would explain what they really needed was a new heart (Ezekiel 36:26).

Yet God remained faithful to Israel. He continued to pursue them and send prophets to call them back to Himself. Through another prophet, Hosea, God illustrated this with the metaphor of marriage: God was the faithful husband; Israel was the adulterous wife. Israel deserved divorce, yet God continued to pursue her, forgive her, and take her back. This backstory helps prepare us for Elijah's message calling God's people back to Himself in covenant relationship.

When we think of Elijah, most of us think of his miracles, but miracles were not just a show of power, they were part of the message. Performing miracles authenticated the prophets' message; it proved they were really sent from God. But the miracles also contributed to the message themselves. Elijah's miracles weren't random; they each

said something significant about God's sovereignty, His faithfulness, His provision, His care for the vulnerable, and His love for the whole world. Prophets are messengers. The message *was* the ministry. Both their words and deeds were part of the message. As we go through the stories of Elijah and Elisha, we will look for the message they were preaching about God, whether through their words or their actions.

Q: How can you personally relate to the Israelites and their obedience/disobedience cycle in relation to God?

Q: In what ways have you seen God's faithfulness at different points in your life?

Q: What experiences have convinced you that God was providing for and guiding you?

Acts 3:17–26 [Read]

Talking Point 3: The Old Testament prophets point ahead to our need for Jesus.

Q: How did Jesus fulfill the promise to the people of a prophet like Moses?

Q: How is Peter's call for repentance similar to that of the Old Testament prophets? To whom does Peter point the people to turn in repentance?

Back in the passage from Deuteronomy, we read at the beginning of this lesson, when God was first bringing His people into the land, He promised He would raise up a prophet like Moses for His people. Like many of the Old Testament prophecies, this had both a near-future fulfillment and a long-term fulfillment in Christ. All the Old Testament prophets who spoke God's truth to His people foreshadowed Christ in some way, but Christ was the ultimate prophet who came and not only spoke God's Word but embodied God's Word: He was the Word made flesh.

Peter explained in this sermon in Acts 3 that all the prophets foretold Christ. Peter echoed the same message of the Old Testament prophets – repent and turn to God. This was the message, over and over, and it is still the same message in Christ. Elijah and Elisha were “prophets like Moses” in that they confronted kings; they called the people back to the covenant; and they revealed God's power through miracles. Like every prophet, Elijah and Elisha pointed ahead to Jesus as the ultimate prophet, not only in their words but also in their deeds. As we study their lives, we will note all the times they foreshadowed Christ in what they said and did:

- Elijah raised a widow's son (1 Kings 17:17–24) as Jesus did (Luke 7:11–17).
- Elisha fed multitudes (2 Kings 4:42–44) as Jesus did (John 6).
- Elisha healed a leper (2 Kings 5:1–14) as Jesus did (Luke 17:11–19).

- Elijah and Elisha ministered to Gentiles (1 Kings 17:8–24; 2 Kings 5) as Jesus did (Matthew 8:5–13; 15:21–28). Jesus even referred to Elijah and Elisha’s helping Gentiles (Luke 4:24–27) to explain God’s mission to the whole world.

In the last verses of the Old Testament, the prophet Malachi promised Elijah would come before the Messiah to prepare the way (Malachi 4:5–6). John the Baptist was an Elijah-like figure, coming in the power and spirit of Elijah (Luke 1:17). Elijah and Elisha pointed ahead to Jesus, but Jesus was greater. They said, “Thus says the Lord,” but Jesus said, “I say to you....” They spoke God’s Word, but Jesus *was* God’s Word made flesh. Elijah and Elisha were signposts, not the destination. They showed what God’s kingdom looked like in glimpses – His power, His provision, His compassion, His salvation – but Jesus was the full reality. Jesus was the one who would finally give His people the new heart they needed to be able to follow God.

Q: Has anyone recently asked you to describe Jesus and what He is like? How would you answer that question?

Q: If you were telling a non-Christian friend about your faith, why would you say that you know you need Jesus in your life?

Q: How has Jesus changed your heart? How has your life changed as a result?

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We have a privilege that Elijah and Elisha did not – to proclaim the name of Jesus to those in our spheres of influence. And yet, it can be intimidating. A 2025 survey found that 65 percent of Americans felt they could not speak freely for fear of violence, job loss or tension with family and friends.⁵ So how do you live boldly for Christ in a world that often has little tolerance for truth?

“As a Christian, you’ve been cleansed by the blood of Christ and set apart for a special purpose. If you’re not living in boldness, you’re living in fear. So be bold when it comes to doing things for God, trusting that He’ll see you through and knowing that the more you do it, the easier it gets!”⁶ —
Senior Pastor Jack Graham

This week, take a step of faith. Have a Gospel conversation, share a word of encouragement, or speak truth in love – even if you don’t know how it will be received. Trust God to work through your obedience and watch how He uses your boldness to impact lives for His glory.

CHALLENGES

THINK: Think about the role of the prophet in the Old Testament. Why was it hard to be a prophetic voice among God’s people? What kind of faith did the prophets have to have? Now reflect on the Church in America today. Where might we need a voice to speak God’s truth with clarity and boldness to us?

PRAY: Pray for the American Church, the Church around the world, and the individual churches in our community. Pray God will raise up people who will speak the truth, even when it’s hard, and call us out on the ways we are straying from God and bring us back to Him in repentance. Pray for Christian voices to speak to the wider culture and call people to turn to Jesus. Pray for the Church to be a light that speaks the truth of the Gospel to the world, not false messages that just tell us what we want to hear.

ACT: Encourage the prophetic voices. Write a letter, text or email of encouragement to any believers you know who speak the hard truths, either challenging the Church and bringing believers back to Jesus or calling people to follow Jesus for the first time. Tell

them how their speaking truth has impacted your life and your community and encourage them to keep speaking truth, even when it's hard.

¹ <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/06/23/i-humbly-beg-your-speedy-answer-mary-beth-norton-book-review#:~:text=The%20Athenian%20Gazette%2C%20or%20Casuistical,as%20it's%20usually%20known%2C%20offered.>

² <https://news.cornell.edu/stories/2025/04/love-and-athenian-mercury-1600s-advice-column-still-resonates>

³ Gary V. Smith, *The Prophets as Preachers: An Introduction to the Hebrew Prophets* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994).

⁴ John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).

⁵ <https://www.freedomforum.org/about-freedom-forum/media-advisory/2025-09-25/>

⁶ https://www.crosswalk.com/devotionals/powerpoint/powerpoint-november-25-2011.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com