

He Gave Us Prophets

Study Guide

LESSON
SEVEN

THE PURPOSE OF PREDICTIONS



THIRD MILLENNIUM
MINISTRIES

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STUDY GUIDE

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How to use this lesson and study guide

- **Before you watch the lesson**
 - **Preparation** — Complete any recommended readings.
 - **Schedule breaks** — Review the outline and the time codes to determine where to begin and end your viewing session. IIM lessons are densely packed with information, so you may want to schedule breaks. Breaks should be scheduled at major divisions in the outline.
- **While you are watching the lesson**
 - **Notes** — Use the Notes section to follow the lesson and to take additional notes. Many of the main ideas are already summarized in the notes, but make sure to supplement these with your own notes. You should also add supporting details that will help you to remember, describe, and defend the main ideas.
 - **Pause/replay portions of the lesson** — You may find it helpful to pause or replay the video at certain points in order to write additional notes, review difficult concepts, or discuss points of interest.
- **After you watch the lesson**
 - **Review Questions** — Questions on the basic content of the lesson. Answer review questions in the space provided. Review questions should be completed individually rather than in a group.
 - **Application Questions** — Questions relating the content of the lesson to Christian living, theology, and ministry. Application questions are appropriate for written assignments or as topics for group discussions. For written assignments, it is recommended that answers not exceed one page in length.

Outline

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 - 2. Covenant Promises (3:53)
 - 3. Eternal Counsel (4:45)
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- IV. Certainty of Predictions (21:02)
 - A. Conditional Predictions (23:33)
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- V. Goals of Predictions (34:46)
 - A. Popular Perspectives (35:07)
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 - 1. "Who Knows?" Reaction (39:28)
 - 2. Twofold Reaction (42:30)
- VI. Conclusion (43:54)

Notes

I. Introduction

II. Divine Sovereignty

The Bible's doctrine of the sovereignty of God provides an essential background for understanding the predictions of the future.

A. God's Immutability

The doctrine of immutability teaches that God is unchanging.

1. God's Character

God's character does not change. He is always loving, just, knowing all things, all powerful, present everywhere.

God's attributes never vary with time.

2. Covenant Promises

When God makes a covenant oath, it remains valid forever and it will never be broken.

3. Eternal Counsel

God has an unchangeable plan that governs all of history.

The prophets understood that God would always be true to his character. He would always keep his firm covenant promises. God's counsel and His control over all things would never fail.

B. God's Providence

Providence: God's active involvement in history as he works out his eternal plan for the universe.

God works out his plan by interacting with his creation in different ways. He interacts with second causes, or creaturely causes in at least three different ways.

- Necessarily — things take place according to the regular laws of nature, like the law of gravity.
- Freely — things appear random from a human point of view.
- Contingently — God controls the direction of history by interacting with the contingencies of human choice.

III. Predictions & Contingencies

Sometimes God works out his eternal plan through the contingencies of human choice.

A. General Patterns

Jeremiah 18:1-10

- Jeremiah's observation
- the Lord's explanation
- the Lord's elaboration

1. Observation

The potter worked with the lump of clay, shaping it as seemed best to him.

2. Explanation

God reserved the right to do with his people as seemed best to him, just like the potter would with his clay.

3. Elaboration

God applied this analogy of the potter and the clay to prophetic predictions.

The historical contingency of human choice could make a big difference in the way God fulfilled a prophecy of judgment.

God is free to react to the way human beings responded to threats of judgment and offers of blessing.

B. Specific Examples

1. Prediction of Shemaiah

Prophecy: God would abandon Shishak.

For people unfamiliar with the ministries of the prophets, it sounds as if Shemaiah revealed an eternal, unchangeable decree of God.

Rehoboam and the leaders of Judah hoped these words were just a warning from God — what God was going to do if they did not repent.

Shemaiah warned of judgment to come:

- not so that he could condemn people to everlasting perdition
- but so that people would hear this warning, repent and then receive the grace of God

2. **Prediction of Jonah**

Prophecy: Nineveh would be overturned in 40 days.

An intervening historical contingency of repentance took place before the prophecy could be fulfilled.

The contingency of human choice influenced the ways prophecies were fulfilled.

IV. Certainty of Predictions

Variations in Old Testament predictions:

- covenant blessings and judgments

- greater and lesser judgments and blessings

- level of God's determination to carry through with judgments and blessings

When the prophets speak of God having very high or low levels of determination to carry out a prophecy, they are speaking of him in very human terms.

A. Conditional Predictions

Explicit conditions in the form of “if then” statements appear many times in the Old Testament prophets.

The direction that history would take would be determined by the kinds of choices people made.

B. Unqualified Predictions

Simple statements about the future with no explicit conditions.

Higher levels of human response could turn events in different directions.

Covenant blessings also appear in the form of unqualified predictions.

C. Confirmed Predictions

Old Testament prophets communicated God's higher determination by showing that God confirmed certain predictions.

1. Words

The prophets used words to confirm God's determination.

2. Signs

Prophetic signs and symbolic actions made it clear that God had very high levels of determination.

When a sign accompanied a prophecy, it showed that God was very determined to carry out what the prophet had predicted.

D. Sworn Predictions

Often prophets simply announced that God had sworn to do something.

When God adds an oath to a prophetic prediction it raises that prediction to the level of a covenantal certainty.

V. Goals of Predictions

A. Popular Perspectives

“Prognostication” — predominant view of the purpose of predictions in the Old Testament.

Many Christians believe that prophets simply foretold the future; they gave foreknowledge of things to come.

- Deuteronomy 18:20-22
- *Misconception*: If a true prophet of the Lord says anything, then that thing must happen just as he said it.
- *Corrective*: Ask not just, “What did the prophet say explicitly?” but also, “What implicit conditions apply?”

B. Correct Perspectives

Prophets spoke of a future primarily to motivate or to activate their listeners.

- The prophets did not primarily want to inform their listeners *about* the future
- They primarily wanted to activate their listeners to *form* the future.

1. “Who Knows?” Reaction

This “Who Knows” reaction took place in three situations.

2 Samuel 12:14

- Nathan confronted David over his adultery with Bathsheba.
- David’s response: “Who knows?”

Jonah 3:4, 9

- Jonah told the city of Nineveh that judgment was coming.
- King’s response: “Who knows?”

Joel 2:1-11

- Joel announced that a terrible judgment was coming against Jerusalem.
- Joel’s encouragement: “Who knows?”

Old Testament believers did not think that prophetic predictions sealed their fates. Intervening historical contingencies — especially prayer — could affect the ways that prophecies were fulfilled.

2. Twofold Reaction

Judgments:

- To ensure that a threatened judgment would take place, ignore the warning and remain in rebellion against God.
- Repentance and trust in Yahweh was the only hope for avoiding the judgment of God.

Blessings:

- Flagrant rebellion against God might remove the predicted blessing and replace it with judgment
- Continued faithful living would bring the promised blessing for sure.

The goal of prophetic predictions was not primarily to prognosticate, but to activate the people of God in the service of the Lord.

VI. Conclusion

9. What reactions did Old Testament prophets hope to inspire in their original audiences?

Application Questions

1. How can your understanding of God's immutability sustain you during difficult times?
2. How does it make you feel that your choices and reactions to God affect the direction of history?
3. Knowing that prayer can affect the way prophecy is fulfilled, what new kinds of prayers might Christians be motivated to pray?
4. How might a "who knows?" attitude affect your prayer life?
5. This study has shown that the prophets wanted to activate their listeners to form the future. How should this affect the way Christians use Old Testament prophetic books?
6. How does the idea that prophecy is fundamentally conditional make you feel? Does it reassure you? Does it frighten you?
7. Does the conditionality of prophecy challenge anything else you believe?
8. What is the most significant insight you have learned from this study? Why?