

He Gave Us Prophets

Study Guide

LESSON
SEVEN

THE PURPOSE OF PREDICTIONS



THIRD MILLENNIUM
MINISTRIES

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HOW TO USE THIS LESSON AND STUDY GUIDE

This study guide is designed for use in conjunction with the associated video lesson. If you do not have access to the video, the study guide will also work with the audio and/or text versions of the lesson. Additionally, the lesson and study guide are intended to be used in a learning community, but they also can be used for individual study if necessary.

- **Before you watch the lesson**
 - **Prepare** — Complete any recommended readings.
 - **Schedule viewing** — In the Notes section of the study guide, the lesson has been divided into sections that correspond to the video. Using the time codes found in parentheses beside each major division, determine where to begin and end your viewing session. IIM lessons are densely packed with information, so you may also want to schedule breaks. Breaks should be scheduled at major divisions.
- **While you are watching the lesson**
 - **Take notes** — The Notes section of the study guide contains a basic outline of the lesson, including the time codes for the beginning of each section and key notes to guide you through the information. Many of the main ideas are already summarized, 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.
 - **Record comments and questions** — As you watch the video, you may have comments and/or questions on what you are learning. Use the margins to record your comments and questions so that you can share these with the group following the viewing session.
 - **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**
 - **Complete Review Questions** — Review Questions are based on the basic content of the lesson. You should answer Review Questions in the space provided. These questions should be completed individually rather than in a group.
 - **Answer/discuss Application Questions** — Application Questions are 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.

Notes

I. Introduction (0:26)

II. Divine Sovereignty (1:26)

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

A. God's Immutability (2:46)

The doctrine of immutability teaches that God is unchanging.

1. God's Character (3:20)

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 (3:53)

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

3. Eternal Counsel (4:45)

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 (7:22)

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 (10:38)

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

A. General Patterns (11:25)

Jeremiah 18:1-10

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

1. Observation (11:59)

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

2. Explanation (12:50)

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

3. Elaboration (13:34)

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 (15:39)**1. Prediction of Shemaiah (16:05)**

Prophecy: God would abandon Israel to 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 (18:33)**

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 (21:02)

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 (23:33)

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 (24:35)

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 (26:31)

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

1. Words (27:06)

The prophets used words to confirm God's determination.

2. Signs (28:39)

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 (30:05)

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.

Even in sworn predictions, there is latitude for God to react to intervening historical contingencies.

- Timing can be influenced by the reactions of people.
- Who will experience the prediction often remains flexible.
- The means by which a prediction will take place is often unspecified.
- To what degree a prediction will be fulfilled remains an open question.

Prayers and repentance, rebellion and defiance, could make tremendous differences in the fulfillment of predictions.

- Oath of judgment in Amos 6:8

- Oath of blessing in Isaiah 62:8

V. Goals of Predictions (34:46)**A. Popular Perspectives (35:07)**

“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 (38:48)

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 (39:28)

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 (42:30)

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 (43:54)

3. How are God's immutability and providence compatible expressions of God's sovereignty?

4. How are predictions affected by historical contingencies?

7. What are the mistaken popular perspectives on the purpose of Old Testament predictions?

8. What is the significance of the “Who knows?” reaction?

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?

Glossary

Amos – Prophet who ministered from around 760-750 B.C. when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam was king of Israel

conditional predictions – Prophetic predictions that were qualified with explicit conditions, often in the form of “if ... then ...” statements

confirmed predictions – Prophetic predictions confirmed by God’s words and signs that indicated a high level of God’s determination to take events in a particular direction

contingency – Term used to refer to the nature of one thing depending on another; used to describe how some of God’s predictions may be fulfilled in different ways, depending on human response

covenant – A binding legal agreement made between two people or groups of people, or between God and a person or group of people

David – Second Old Testament king of Israel who received the promise that his descendant would sit on the throne and reign forever

eternal counsel – God’s eternal plan for the universe, established before his work of creation

immutable – Term meaning “unchanging”; used to express the unchanging nature of God’s character and perfections

Joel – Old Testament prophet who ministered sometime during the deportations to Babylon; offered hope of restoration after the exile; spoke of a future outpouring of the Holy Spirit; quoted by Peter on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2

Jonah – Prophet called to preach during the reign of Jeroboam II from around 793-753 B.C.; sent to warn Nineveh of God’s judgment and was swallowed by a large fish when he refused to go

mi yodea – Hebrew term (transliteration) meaning “Who knows?”; common Hebraic expression meaning one does not know what the future holds

Moses – Old Testament prophet and deliverer who led the Israelites out of Egypt; man with whom God made a national “covenant of law” and who administered the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant to the Israelites; also appeared with Elijah at Jesus’ transfiguration

Nathan – Prophet and trusted advisor to King David

Nineveh – Capital of Assyria; known for its wickedness; city where God sent the prophet Jonah to issue a warning of judgment

prognostication – The act of foretelling the future

prophet – God’s emissary who proclaims and applies God’s word, especially to warn of judgment against sin and to encourage loyal service to God that leads to blessings

providence – God’s active involvement in history as he works out his eternal plan for his creation and the welfare of his people

Rehoboam – Son of King Solomon who reigned after him and mistreated the northern tribes of Israel, leading to the divided kingdom

second causes – Created beings or objects that perform real, but secondary roles in causing events to occur

Shemaiah – Prophet in Judah during the reign of Rehoboam; also known as “the man of God”

sovereign/sovereignty – Theological term that refers to God’s continuing rule and complete authority over all creation

sworn predictions – Prophetic predictions that revealed God’s sworn oath to carry out what he has said he will do

unqualified predictions – Prophetic predictions that were simple statements about the future without any explicit conditions attached

Westminster Confession of Faith – An ecumenical doctrinal summary composed by the Westminster Assembly of Divines and published in 1647