

He Gave Us Prophets

Lesson 7

The Purpose of Predictions

Forum



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Lesson Seven: The Purpose of Predictions

Faculty Forum

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Dr. Carey Vinzant
Dr. Sanders L. Willson

Question 1:

What is God's immutability?

Dr. Glenn R. Kreider

By “immutability” we mean that God is not mutable. We mean that God does not change, that his immutability is a reference to his unchanging nature, his unchanging character. He is always loving. He is always merciful. He is always holy. He is always just. Immutability is sometimes misunderstood — to deny that God changes in his way of dealing with people, that there is a static way that God relates to people. But when the Scripture talks about us, in Ephesians, being “by nature children of wrath,” but now, because of the redemptive work of Christ, we are God’s friends, we are in a relationship with him in no way to undermine that God does not change in who he is, but he does change, by virtue of his own action on our behalf, change in his relationship to us.

Dr. Glen G. Scorgie

One of the many significant attributes of God, the Triune God, is immutability. That’s the term that you’ll find in many theology texts. Immutability might be translated “unchanging.” And that’s really wonderful news because we are so aware of the impermanence and the transience of just about everything in our lives, in the world, in our relationships, and even in our own fleeting lives. I think of that descriptor of God as the still point in a turning universe. What is there that draws our restless souls to a vision of a God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever? I think it’s this profound psychological and spiritual need we all have for that which is rock solid, that which is trustworthy, that which can function as an anchor for the soul when the mountains shake and everything appears to be falling into the sea. That’s a legitimate human need. When it’s not found in God, that need can drive us to addictions and all sorts of pathologies, and a kind of emotional infantilism that makes us less than

adults. But when it's anchored in God, when it's rightly centered in God, we become people of strength. We find our strength in this immutable God. Now in the history of Christian theology, however, there was an unfortunate appropriation early on of some platonic notions of God's immutability that implied that God was serenely detached and unaffected by the problems and struggles of his creatures and could not be touched in any way by what was going on in our chaotic existence. And so, this alien platonic notion of God's impassability effectively distanced God, at least in our perceptions of him, made him a cool and more philosophical essence than the dynamic, impassioned, personal God of Scripture. So, I think it's very important that we affirm that constancy of character and that firmness of resolve that immutability truly represents. The God who begins a good work and brings it to completion, that's the God we're talking about. But the immutable God is God the Father who is not untouched by the suffering and neediness of people, who is not unresponsive to their prayers. This God is an interactive, relational God whose stability of character and purpose is something we worship and adore.

Dr. J. Scott Horrell

When we say God is immutable, we mean he does not change. Of course, that's applied to Jesus Christ, "the same yesterday, today ... forever." But what doesn't change? The eternal Son assumed a human nature. Is that God changing? Theologians have always said, "No, that's not what we mean by immutability." Immutability means the attributes of God — again, that "Godness" of God does not change — so that the eternal Son would assume a human nature does not alter his divine nature. That's what does not change, and so with the Spirit, and so with the Father.

Dr. Jeffery Moore

Among the different attributes of God that we talk about, there's one called immutability, from the Latin that means he's not changing. He doesn't mutate, I guess is how we would hear that in English. God doesn't change, and that comes specifically straight from the Bible in many places, but most obviously, "Jesus Christ the same yesterday ... today, and for ever." The Bible is clear that God doesn't change, and yet it does describe things that look like change. For example ... the fact that the Bible talks about God changing his mind doesn't contradict God not changing ... but the important thing there is that the way that God relates to us doesn't change, therefore, I can count on that consistency. God doesn't, for example, when we're talking about God's law, the Bible doesn't indicate that God, *over time*, gets a little softer, you know. God doesn't lower his standards, you know. It isn't like he's looked at the human race for thousands of years now and said, "Well, you know, I knew they weren't perfect, but now I see how really imperfect they are, so they don't have to live up to the same standards." Those things never change. What God told Moses on Mount Sinai and what God has revealed throughout the Scriptures, still the same. We are held to the same standard, which would be very frightening if it were not for the fact that the gospel message doesn't change either, that God has always loved his creation and, specifically, very purposefully loved human beings enough that he came into the world to make a difference in our lives, to change it so that we wouldn't be consigned to hell forever, but could live with him in heaven forever. So, when the

Bible talks about God not changing, it may be talking in a law term. So, you know, don't think that the standards are relaxed. But also, always, it comes back to, in the gospel, God does still love us. There's no point in my life where I can say God's love can't reach me here, God's love has now ended because of whatever it is that I've done. God's immutability is a warning to us on the one side and a great comfort to us on the other.

Question 2: **In what ways is God immutable?**

Dr. Miguel Nuñez, translation

God is immutable in his essence. God is immutable in his characteristics as God. When God speaks, that word is immutable. When God is powerful, that power is immutable. When we talk about God's wisdom, that wisdom is immutable precisely because it belongs to God, and God is perfect. God is eternal, the same from eternity to eternity. The attributes of God are all immutable. When we think of a mutable or changeable being, we are no longer thinking about the Creator. We are no longer thinking about God. We are thinking of a creature. The creature is the one who changes, changes when she gets old, changes because he is not perfect, changes because we can improve. When we exist or believe or think something, since we are creatures, we can improve in the future, and therefore, change to improve. But God is perfect. He does not need to improve. He cannot improve. It is not only that he is immutable. He cannot change because, by virtue of being God, he is a perfect being in himself, independent of everything, not dependent on anybody. Nothing affects him. Nothing transforms him. Nothing changes him. He does not age. He exists outside of time and space. He is a being without comparison, set apart, and therefore, we can only talk about the immutability of God. So, regarding the question: How is God immutable? In every way that we can think of God, God is immutable. His decrees are immutable. His word is immutable. His essence, as we said, is immutable. His Spirit is immutable because he is God, and God by definition is immutable.

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

To say that God's immutable means that he's unchanging in his being, perfections, purposes and promises. So, his being — his nature, his essence; his perfections — the degree to which he possesses those characteristics; his purposes — what he has determined to do; and his promises — what he's told us he'll do. So, God's unchanging in those ways. That's not to say that God doesn't relate to us in a dynamic, relational, personal way. So, he listens to our prayers. He grieves over our sin. He delights in our faithfulness. And so, it's been said that God is essentially immutable, but relationally mutable. There's a degree to which he adapts what he's doing to our relationship with him, while at the same time maintaining his essential attributes.

Dr. Robert G. Lister

God's immutable in his essence and in his character. So, as God, he's fundamentally unchanging. He's fundamentally self-sufficient. He's fundamentally not dependent on his creation. In his character, he's fundamentally faithful; he's fundamentally committed to keeping his promises. So we can rely on him in those capacities. Because God is changeless in his essence and changeless in his character, we can also be confident that, in keeping those promises that he has pledged himself to keep, God will change in relationship to his creatures in ways that are appropriate... When a sinner lays hold of the promise of salvation, it's not just a change on the part of the sinner, but God changes in relationship to the sinner from a status of wrath and judgment to a status of peace and reconciliation. Now, God's keeping that promise, which involves changing in relationship to the sinner, is predicated or based on the very fact that God is changeless in his character and his essence. It is the fact that God is reliable in his promise-keeping yesterday, today, and tomorrow that a sinner can know that on any day he or she repents, that promise stands for him or her and that God will change in his disposition from wrath to reconciliation.

Question 3:**Why must God's eternal plan be immutable?****Dr. Carl R. Trueman**

God's eternal plan must be immutable for a number of reasons. One, God himself is eternal and unchanging, and therefore, any plan that arises out of his nature must also partake of being unchangeable. Secondly, the prophecies of the Old Testament. God cannot deliver on his promises if he doesn't already know and control the way that history is flowing. If God changes his mind, then his promises in the Old Testament are hollow promises. Thirdly, that leads to a distinct pastoral point. The immutability of God and the immutability of God's purposes is a vital pastoral doctrine because it's only if we know that God's plan is absolutely reliable, it's only if we know that God does not change, that he will always fight for his people, that he will always fulfill his promises for his people, it's only if we know that, that we can actually preach the gospel with confidence or apply it from one believer to another. So, I would say for biblical, theological and pastoral reasons, God's plan must be immutable.

Dr. Carey Vinzant

God being changeless in the Old Testament is not about God being ontologically static. It's about God's faithfulness as a person; it's about God's trustworthiness in delivering on his promises to his people. So, I think the point when we talk about God's plan being immutable, God's eternal plan being immutable ... is that we are saying that God is committed to doing what is best, as he knows it, for everything including his people that he has made. And because he is the Maker and he is the overseer of history, things will work out the way he has designed them to work out, but that does not necessitate a sort of micro-managerial view of providence.

Rev. Larry Cockrell

God's eternal plan must also be immutable because God is immutable, meaning that he is unchanging. God being immutable says to us that he's unlike us... And since he is unchangeable, everything that emanates from him as it relates to his eternal plan, has to also be unchangeable. What God has decreed before the foundations of the world has to be unchangeable as well. If not, then that tells me that God has to adjust his plan and that speaks, then, to the fact that ... he may not be all-knowing — the fact that he was not able, from the offset to ascertain or determine what exactly would occur — and so then that would go against what we have learned in Scripture about him having foreknowledge, having predestined, predetermined things to take place in that respect there. And so, we would know that even before Adam and Eve's sin in the garden, Christ had already, before the foundations of the earth, had become the Passover Lamb who ultimately would take care, who would atone for sin, as such. And so that tells me that God's plan, because of who he is, is unchangeable as well, and his eternal will is being accomplished. When I look at human history, and I like to say that all human history serves God's purpose. You know, we like to think that man is impacting human history, and yes, to an extent they are, but they are impacting it under the auspices and the supervision of God himself.

Question 4:**What do theologians mean by the providence of God?****Dr. Carey Vinzant**

Very simply, the providence of God means that God is not just omnipresent. He is omnipresent and up to something. The doctrine of providence is the idea that God is at work in history in ways that are... in subtle ways. So, you have the sense... You know, one of the major devices in theater is the idea of *Deus ex machina*, the idea that things are going along in logical mechanistic fashion, and then there's a huge plot twist at the end where the gods intervene and bring the story to an unexpected resolution. Well, the whole point of the doctrine of providence is that God is never "*ex machina*." He is never absent from events. Events are always happening in his presence and under his hand, under his guidance.

Prof. Brandon P. Robbins

In today's society, or in Christian circles today, there are probably two prevailing views of God's providence. I hold to the circle that sees God's providence as — since God has foreordained all things to come to pass — his continual engagement and governing of his creation by the power of his will. Another competing view that is very popular for some today comes from middle knowledge or Molinism, believing that God is a God that knows all possible contingencies, knows all possible actions that individuals would do given a certain state of affairs, and then God literally changes in some sense to organize and govern things in a way that does not, in any way, interrupt the libertarian free will of individuals... This view tries to make a strong case very often, but it seems so complex. It seems hard for me to believe that

people like the apostle Paul and the writings of Scripture, had such a complex conception of providence in mind whenever they were speaking of the God of the Bible. A more simplistic answer — that God simply governs by the power of his will — seems to be the one that's most consistent, that we find in Scripture.

Dr. Carl R. Trueman

Theologians use the term “providence of God” to speak of the way in which God guides all things towards their end. Essentially, it means that nothing happens without God willing it to happen, and so everything is ultimately fitted into this great jigsaw, if you like, or this great pattern that conforms with God's plan for the universe.

Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry

Well, when we talk about the providence of God, what we're talking about is God's ongoing care for his creation and all his creatures. We don't just believe that God created the world and kind of wandered off to do something else. No, God continues to sustain the world by his word of power. Through his Word, through his Spirit, God continues to sustain the world. So, we think about God providing what we need: food, water, air, all those things we take for granted, God's providing them. That's why it's important we say our thanks to God. We say grace at meals and offer him praise and thanksgiving. Every good gift we got from the Father above. So, we need to remember he gives us everything we need. He is the governor. He's actually overseeing all events, even historical events, sometimes that seem wild, out of control, but God is omnipotent above all these things, guiding them, allowing things to happen that we may be mystified by, but we believe God is still in charge and guiding them to his own outcome. But also, if you like, particularly providing for us and for our salvation, helping us to realize our need for his gracious restorative work, our rebuilding work, and that he will one day take us to that new heavens and new earth if we put our faith in him, repent, be baptized. We're following him to this new kingdom. What we're going to see there is the fullness of God's providential care when he does, as the great heavenly Father who loves us so much, provides us every good gift that we need to sustain us in the work he's given us to do.

Dr. Sanders L. Willson

Well, the word “providence” comes from a Latin word — *providio*, which means, “to see ahead” — but in theology, it means more than just seeing ahead. It means to ordain and govern everything that's occurring in history. So, when we talk about the decree of God from all eternity, it usually breaks out into two categories: creation and providence. So, God has made all things, and then he sustains and governs all things, and it includes everything. Every blade of grass, every star, every meteor, everything that ever happened in space and time, God is sovereignly in control of it, and he does it according to his own wise, loving counsel.

Question 5: **What is divine foreknowledge?**

Dr. Philip Ryken

Part of the doctrine of the sovereignty of God is God's foreknowledge, his knowledge of things in advance before they even happen. And this is one of the great mysteries of the character of God. To me this is one of the things that really causes us to worship God for who he is, to realize here's a God who knows the end from the beginning. But when we use the term "foreknowledge" in its biblical sense, it's not just that God knows in advance what's going to happen, but he actually has an intention and a purpose. And foreknowledge, typically in the Bible, is used in the context of our salvation. Who are the people that God foreknows? It's the people that he has a saving plan, that he would redeem us in Jesus Christ. And so, the doctrine of the foreknowledge of God, I think, is a doctrine that leads to worship just because it shows how amazing the mind of God is, but it's also a doctrine that leads to humility and gratitude, that God has a loving purpose for us in Jesus Christ that goes back before the beginning of time.

Dr. Josh Moody

When we talk about God foreknowing, or the divine foreknowledge, we are discussing two elements primarily. One would be what the word itself means. So, what we're saying is God has foreknown, that is, he has known beforehand, and we are saying that God knows everything. Now, biblically, we not only saying that he foreknows everything. I would argue we're also saying that he is in control of everything, past present and future as the sovereign Lord over every aspect. Not a sparrow falls to the ground but that he knows it, as Jesus put it. And so, he is completely in control. So, he certainly foreknows. He not only foreknows, he's in control of everything. That is part of what we're saying when we talk about his foreknowledge. And there are different ways that Christians have articulated this, and some Christians describe this in more definitive ways than others, but that's one aspect that we're talking about. The other aspect we're talking about is the concept of knowledge as intimacy. So, when Paul talks about how God has "known" us, the knowledge that he seems to be referring to comes from the Old Testament understanding of knowledge, which is really intimacy, even husband and wife kind of intimacy. So we mustn't keep those two things at a distance from each other. And a lot of the controversy over exactly what does God foreknow, and how does he predict it, leaves aside the other element which is that God's foreknowledge of us is the knowledge of a lover. And it's that kind of knowledge — "since from before the creation of the world he has known us," and so we're not just a twinkle in his eye. We're his, if we're his child, we're his loved, known entity from eternity past to eternity future.

Rev. George Shamblin

In the New Testament, we come across different words that will describe what God does in the future, as we know it. One of those words is foreknowledge. There's no

question whatsoever that God foreknows everything that's going to happen in the future, because we know very clearly that God is omnipresent. There's no past to him, there's no present, there's no future. He's not bound by the bookends of time, as we know it. So, God definitely foreknows the future because he's already there. A lot of people confuse, though, foreknowledge with another word that is "predestine." Not only does God foreknow; the Scripture is going to tell us, in like Ephesians 1, that God predestines, we could even say "predetermines," things that happen in the future. I've had a friend of mine say before as an argument against predestination, he said, "Well, God foreknows who's going to choose him because he looks in the future. He sees that that person is going to choose him, and then he predestines that person." That argument always falls down. Number one, it makes salvation dependent upon the man. Number two, God can't be in the past, somehow jump to the future, return back to the past based on man. Not only does he foreknow, but again, the Bible says he predetermines back here everything that's going to happen. It's very interesting that I'll have a friend that will say God is in control of everything, and I say, "Oh, so you must be a Calvinist, you must believe in predestination?" And he says, "Well, he's in control of everything except who's saved and who's not saved." So, I say back to him, "Then you really don't believe God is completely in control of everything that happens." So foreknowledge, the New Testament absolutely talks about, but it's taken a step further. Not only does he foreknow, but he *predetermines*, predestines everything that will happen. Just in summary, God is never caught off guard. He foreknows, but he predestines as well.

Question 6:

How does Jeremiah 18 teach that God allows for human contingencies to alter the outcomes of prophetic predictions?

Dr. Mike Ross

In Jeremiah 18 God sets forth an example, an illustration of a potter and his pottery to show that the decisions of human beings, and even nations, can affect the work of God and his intentions in their lives... The number one rule of life — even though it may not be stated this bluntly, it's implicit in everything that God writes — is simply this, that if we obey God, we'll be blessed; if we don't, then there are dire consequences to be paid. One of the tensions in our theology is between the sovereignty of God and the will of mankind. Pharaoh is used both in the book of Exodus and in the book of Romans as the classic illustration. The Bible says repeatedly in Exodus that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, and then it turns right around and says *Pharaoh* hardened his heart. I think there's, I may be wrong on the number, but there's like eighteen references to that and nine times it says Pharaoh hardened his heart; nine times it says God hardened Pharaoh's heart. And both are true. We make decisions. These decisions have consequences. And God, who intends to do certain things, will punish us if we continue to ignore his word and to disobey him, but if we repent, Ezekiel says, God takes no delight in the destruction of the wicked but desires that they repent and live. So, when an individual, or a church, or a

nation hears the warnings of God's prophets — they hear the gospel, their consciences convict them, and they turn from their wicked ways and begin to pursue the Lord — God is prone to stay his judgments and to reward them instead of punishing them. This is the truth behind all great preaching. Preachers assume that people who are moving away from God can at any time, with the grace of God, turn and come back to the Lord and repent and be saved. They assume that nations can repent and turn back to the Lord and experience revival; the churches can change and experience reformation; that whole nations and people groups can turn back to the Lord and experience some spiritual restoration. So, Jeremiah 18 is the classic proof text, so to speak, that when any people — including a large group of people, a nation — turns back to the Lord, his original intentions to them will be turned to blessing. And, of course, the reverse is true. If a nation is headed down the road of following God and turns into wickedness, then his intentions to bless them would be turned into intentions to discipline them and judge them unless they repent. This is simply the law of reciprocity that Jesus talks about all the time that we reap what we sow and that God responds to our will as much as we respond to his.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Jeremiah 18 is a very important chapter for understanding how God gives prophecies and then fulfills them, but it's not unique. There are many, many passages in the Bible that reveal the same basic principles about how prophecy is fulfilled. And one of the first things we have to say about the way that prophecies are fulfilled is this: God knows everything, and God is never surprised by any reaction anyone ever has to any prophecy that his prophets give. So, God is not making predictions through his prophets and then going, "Whoops, can't do that. I didn't realize they would react in that way." So don't ever think that Jeremiah 18 is teaching that the contingencies that are associated with a prophecy surprise God. They don't surprise him at all. On the contrary, when God gives prophecies through his prophets, he gives them within a context, a framework of understanding, and this framework surrounds every prophetic word. And the framework that surrounds every prophetic word is his covenants... And we know that all of God's covenants have certain elements or certain dynamics to them of God's mercy or God's benevolences and the requirement of loyalty, and that there will be consequences as God wants to give those consequences of blessings and curses for people when they're loyal and when they're disloyal to him. And knowing that that's the basic framework that surrounds every single prediction that's ever given in the Bible, it should not surprise us at all that there are contingencies that are associated with predictions. God does not always have to say those conditions, those contingencies, because they've already been said in his covenants. And it would be as if you would expect a parent to tell a child every single time they said, "I'm going to do something," to list off all the contingencies that might avert what they're going to do. You imagine, can't you, a four-year-old child who's told Sunday coming out of church, "We're going to get some ice cream and go to the park." Well, on the way out of church maybe the mother falls down and breaks her leg, and so they have to run off to the hospital. And that evening when they get home the four-year-old looks at her Daddy and says, "Daddy, we didn't get ice cream today." And he says, "Well, of course not. We took your mother to the hospital." And the little girl looks at

him and says, “But you promised.” Well, what’s the problem with the little girl? It’s not that Daddy was lying to her because Daddy knew this long list of things that could happen, and we wouldn’t go get ice cream and go to the park if these long lists of things happened, and one of those was if your mother falls down and breaks her leg. But the four-year-old didn’t know that yet. She wasn’t mature enough to understand that. And in some respects, when Christians read prophecies they forget the lesson, the understanding that an adult has when words like those are given. There are always implicit conditions that are associated with predictions in the Bible. And those implicit conditions are given to us by other parts of the Bible. When Jonah spoke to Nineveh, and he said, “Forty days hence and Nineveh will be destroyed,” he did not list off all the conditions that might turn that around. But in chapter 4, when Jonah is confronted by God and he says, “Why are you upset?” he says to God, “I knew you would do this because you’re the kind of God who threatens to destroy a city, and if they repent then you don’t do it.” And that’s why Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh because he did not want the possibility of Nineveh repenting. Well, see, everybody in biblical days understood that the covenant surrounds every single prediction that a prophet makes, and that means that, in one way or another, the way people respond to a prophecy can affect, if God wants it to, can affect the way the prophecy will be fulfilled.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

In some instances we may see Old Testament prophets predict things that end up not happening, *ever*. And you might wonder, well, what happened to the word of God in those situations? But Jeremiah 18 gives us some really important insight into how historical contingencies interact with what the prophets predict, because if you look at the predictions of the prophets, you generally see three types of predictions. One are predictions with conditions attached: “If you don’t do this,” — i.e., repent and turn back to me — “this will happen.” And so it’s clear in those cases, if the people repent and turn back to the Lord, the bad thing is not going to happen. You see a second category of prophecies which says, “This is going to happen and nothing’s going to change that.” In fact, a lot of the message of Jeremiah is exactly that — that exile is coming, and the way forward is to accept that and look for God’s purposes in that. But there’s a third kind of prediction that Jeremiah 18 gives us insight into, and that is, if you look at what Jeremiah is saying there, you see that even when conditionality is not explicit, it is often implicit. So, for instance, if you’re standing in the middle of the road and I see a bus coming. I say, “You’re going to get killed!” And you look, and you see the bus, and you run out of the road, and you didn’t get killed. Well, am I a false prophet if I did that? There was an implicit condition that if you jump out of the way, you won’t get killed. And so, there are those cases where there are predictions where the conditionality is implicit, not explicit, and when God’s people respond in the right way, then the prediction doesn’t happen, which is just a natural kind of way that we speak. And how much more so is it a way that God might speak? And he does.

Question 7:

Why is it that some prophecies in Scripture don't come to pass as predicted?

Rev. Sherif Gendy, translation

Some prophecies in Scripture don't come to pass as predicted because prophecies are conditional, with either explicit or implicit conditions. So, the response of the people towards these conditions determines the way in which the prophecy is fulfilled. Let's take an example of explicit conditions. In Isaiah 1:18-20, the prophet says,

Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword (Isaiah 1:18-20).

Here, we see very explicit conditions. "If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land." There will be blessings. But if you refuse, there will be punishment — "you shall be eaten by the sword." This is an example of a prophecy with conditions based on obedience or disobedience that will bring judgment. We also find an example of implicit conditions in Jeremiah 7:5-7, where the prophet says,

For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever (Jeremiah 7:5-7).

The conditions listed here include not oppressing "the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow." If these conditions are fulfilled, the promise is to let them dwell in that place, in the land that God gave to their fathers. The implicit condition here is that if they *do* oppress the sojourner, the fatherless and the widow, if they act on the contrary, the prophecy will not be fulfilled. He will not let them dwell in the land that he promised to their fathers. So, the way the people respond to the explicit and implicit conditions in the prophecies determines the way in which a prophecy will be fulfilled, according to its conditions.

Dr. Robert G. Lister

There's a principle that's announced to us in Jeremiah 18 whereby God effectively says, "If I threaten judgment on a nation or a people, and they repent, I will withhold the judgment that I intended to do to them." And the flip side is stated as well. "If I promise blessing on a people or king or a nation, and they cease obeying my commands, then I will bring judgment where I had formerly promised blessing." And this principle then seems to get worked out in such a way that this condition is

explicitly stated here, and apparently is carried out in other passages in ways that are implicit, specifically in contexts where God is threatening judgment or promising blessing. And probably the classic example is in the book of Jonah, where God sends Jonah to announce judgment on the people of Nineveh. Jonah does this, and the people of Nineveh repent, invoking this criterion of human repentance, which it seems is what God was trying to stir up in their hearts in the first place.

Dr. Tim Sansbury

When we go to Scripture, and we have a high view of Scripture, and we have a high expectation of the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture, it can be interesting to puzzle over what appear to be prophecies that don't come true, as they've been predicted... In Jeremiah, God says that he has the right, that he withholds the privilege to say one thing — for example, to promise great blessings — but if the people do not obey, and if they turn away from him, that despite the fact that he has said, “I will bless you,” that he could curse them and that he could bring harm. Meanwhile, he also says, “I could also say there will be great harm, and there will be curses in the covenant, but if the people turn towards me and turn away from their sin, I reserve the right,” — so to speak — “not to cause those prophecies to be fulfilled.” If the intent of Scripture, primarily and above all, in prophecy was to tell us the future, then God would not, could not, say those things about his own prophecies. But he does say that, because what he does want in prophecy is to cause change in his people and to bring them back to him.

Question 8:

What do we learn about the influence of human reactions to predictions in the story of Jonah?

Dr. Peter Chow, translation

Some prophecies don't foretell events that must happen, but instead are conditional, such as Jonah's prediction that Nineveh would be judged. God allowed the Ninevites to repent, because if they repented, then his judgment wouldn't fall on them. So, when Jonah proclaimed that Nineveh would fall, the people of Nineveh repented. Actually, the prophet Jonah wasn't too happy about this. He'd hoped that Nineveh would be judged, but because they repented, God didn't judge them. This is one of the examples where the prophecy stated the condition that failure to repent would result in judgment, and thus repentance meant no judgment.

Dr. Robert G. Lister

There is an interesting class of prophecies in Scripture that apparently are not fulfilled, or don't come to pass... Now, the classic example of this is in the book of Jonah, where Jonah goes to the city of Nineveh, when he finally gets there, and says, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown,” in fulfillment of God's command to him to go and warn of this coming judgment, coming condemnation on Nineveh. The people of Nineveh are not told that if they repent they will be spared. The king

and the people surmise that perhaps this might be the case, and they decide to call a fast and — on the hope that if they repent, that God may relent of the judgment he intended to do to them — they find, in fact, that that is what happens... What I think we actually see is that God's intention is accomplished. God intends, by way of the word of warning through Jonah, to stir up the repentance of the Ninevites so that he may treat them in kind with mercy instead of judgment. It is interesting that in the case of the book of Jonah, God does not just rain fire from heaven. He could. They're already wicked. They're already guilty. They're already deserving of judgment. So, when Jonah shows up and says, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh will be overthrown," he attaches a time period. And it's interesting to ask the question: Why is there a time period between the announcement of God's judgment and the foretold experience of God's judgment? It seems to me that that's an indicator that God's purpose here is to give them an opportunity to repent. He initiates the relationship. He initiates the contact by issuing the word of warning so that there will be an opportunity to repent, when he could have just rained fire had he so chosen. He didn't. His desire was to stir up their repentance. It's also interesting to see Jonah's response to what happens to the Ninevites in chapter 4 of the book of Jonah. After the people repent, and God relents from his fierce anger, Jonah says effectively, "I knew this is what you were going to do. This is why I fled to Tarshish in the first place, because I knew what kind of God you are — slow to anger, abounding in compassion, steadfast in love. Basically, you love to forgive sinners. That's why I left in the first place." Not because God told him, "I'm sending you there to preach this message with the result that they will repent," but God told him, "Go and preach judgment," and Jonah knew the character of God. So Jonah, it seems, knows that God's intention in this instance is to stir up their repentance, which means that God's word accomplishes what it was intended to accomplish.

If I could use an analogy, when I warn my children, my young children, not to play in the street, and I threaten them with judgment, so to speak, if they disobey that command, my purpose in issuing that warning is not done in hopes that they will disobey my command and play in the street, and then I will have the opportunity to punish them. That's not my desire. My desire in stating the warning is to establish the boundary of prohibition so that they will heed my call and not do what I have prohibited in that instance. In a similar fashion, God's taking the initiative with these people who, like all of the rest of us don't deserve it, is done so for the purpose of stirring up their repentance so he may relate to them in kind. It's not the only kind of prophecy that there is. There are prophecies of unilateral direct fulfillment by God, and prophecies where God says he's going to directly do something through this or that person, and it is unconditionally fulfilled. But there are some examples of prophecies, like this one, where it seems that the condition attaches, and the point of the threat of judgment or the promise of blessing hinges on either continued obedience on the one hand, or repentance on the other.

Rev. Sherif Gendy, translation

The Lord, in general terms, declares these words in Jeremiah 18:7-10:

If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it (Jeremiah 18:7-10).

The Lord here sets a general principle that he could give promises or prophecies of goodness or benevolences to a certain nation. But if this nation does not submit to the Lord and does not live according to his laws and commandments, the Lord will not fulfill the promise or the prophecy he said, and he will not do them good. And on the other hand, if he prophesied to destroy certain people, and this people returned and repented, the prophecy of destruction and devastation would not be fulfilled.

One of the clearest examples for that is Jonah. When Jonah went to Nineveh, the prophecy was, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” in 3:4. We already know from the book of Jonah that the city was not overthrown after the forty days, because a contingent event happened after Jonah said the prophecy. The people repented and returned to the Lord. The prophecy was not fulfilled in Jonah’s days. It was postponed and fulfilled in Nahum’s days, who came and declared the destruction of Nineveh. It was not fulfilled directly in the timeframe or the era Jonah mentioned. Jonah himself told us in 4:2 that he knew that if the people repented, the Lord would be gracious and merciful, forgiving iniquity and transgression. Therefore, Old Testament prophecies have implicit conditions, if not explicit. If the people interacted positively with the prophecy through obedience, the destruction that the prophecy might have indicated would not happen, and vice versa. If the people negatively interacted through rebellion and disobedience, the good that the Lord had previously promised would not happen.

Question 9:**Why does God sometimes put conditions on his prophecies?****Dr. Mark Gignilliat**

God puts conditions on his prophecies in the Prophets, I think, in some sense to remind us that God’s interaction with his people is a lived and dynamic interaction. It’s a relationship. It’s a covenant. It’s a covenant that he’s determined to enter into with people. And so, when God makes a prophecy or gives a prophetic announcement against his people, he will put conditions into that, at times, to provide again that dynamic relationship that gives room for real response in time and space. And those responses matter. And sometimes these qualifications that are made are qualifications

that are reminders — “I’ve claimed you; you’re mine. Come back to me.” You see this throughout Jeremiah’s prophecy from beginning to end. “Why is this bad thing happening to us?” they ask in Jeremiah in his book, and the answer is “Because God has claimed you and you’ve turned away from him.” So these conditions are given to the people to remind them of their covenantal relationship with God and their commitment to that. And sometimes, these qualifications are stated in very clear ways, and sometimes they’re unstated qualifications. I think the most famous one is in Jonah. Jonah gives us the smallest sermon in history. “Forty days and Nineveh is destroyed!” But then ... the pagans turn and God relents from his judgment. And I think what you see there is a prophetic statement that has an unstated qualification. And when you get into Jonah 4, you can see that Jonah’s not real happy about the fact that God pulled back, he relented from his destruction toward the Ninevites. And the reason why Jonah was angry — and I think this gets at the heart of these prophetic qualifications — the reason why Jonah was so angry was because he knew the character of God. God’s gracious — “You’re compassionate; I knew that you were quick to forgive, and you’re doing it with the wrong people” — in the book of Jonah. So, these qualifications that come into the prophetic announcements are rooted in a covenantal relationship with God and his people.

Andrew Abernethy, Ph.D.

It’s common in the prophecies in the Old Testament for God to attach conditions to them, such as, “If you don’t repent you are going to experience judgment.” A wonderful kind of glimpse at this way that God works with his prophecies is in Jeremiah 18 where you have this symbolic experience where Jeremiah has been told to go down to the potter’s house, and he’s observing a potter forming clay, and then all of a sudden the clay becomes warped and the potter starts over again. And God draws upon that to give a teaching lesson for a prophecy that Jeremiah is supposed to give, which is that if Israel is told that if they don’t repent that they’re going to experience judgment. God could change that, because if they do repent, God will change his plan for judgment, if you will, of destroying the pot and remake it now into, Israel, into a restored community. But on the flipside God says, “If I’ve promised to bring good to you, but you instead start doing evil,” he could change his mind too, and he could bring judgment. So, this is a typical way that prophecy works, where God is framing his call for repentance in light of prospective judgment, but also warning those who think they’re destined for a good life that judgment could meet them too if they are not righteous.

Dr. Sanders L. Willson

It seems sometimes that he makes a statement that something’s going to happen in judgment, and then it doesn’t because the parties repent. And then it looks as though God himself repents. In fact, the same word is used about God that is used of sinners, and we go, “I thought God never changed his mind.” Well, eternally he doesn’t change his mind. He decrees whatsoever comes to pass from all eternity. However, in space and time God works with us, and it’s not as though he doesn’t know ahead of time, nor is it that he doesn’t ordain things ahead of time, but he’s still interacting. We’re theists. We believe that God is in personal relationship with his creation, and

he's gracious. So, he does put conditions, either explicitly or implicitly, on prophecies because he desires that none should perish. I mean, there's a compassion about God that is beyond our imagination, and he delights to see one sinner repent, so his judgments are actually acts of grace toward us, or his warnings are acts of grace toward us. And I think God really does delight to change the way that he says something to us because he's also empowered us to repent.

Question 10: **What was the main purpose of biblical prophecy?**

Dr. Chip McDaniel

When we think of prophecy, the purpose of prophecy in the Bible, we tend to think of prediction. The prophets are here to tell us things that are going to happen in the future. But that was never the intent of the biblical prophet. The biblical prophet was sent to God's people to encourage and to exhort — to encourage that God was in control and that he would take care of things as long as they were obedient, but then also, to exhort the people to obey this God that was providing them with such an abundant life. We have this in the New Testament as well. In the book of Thessalonians he says, "Look, Christ is coming back. He's going to wrap things up. God is in control. Don't worry about things as though they're going to continue the way they are because the Lord will return." But then, there's also the exhortation: Work with your hands. Do your work. Provide for your family. And so we also see that there's this element of encouragement and exhortation. Only a small part of the purpose of the prophet was to predict the future, and that's divided into two forms, near prophecy and far prophecy. And according to Deuteronomy 18 and Deuteronomy 13, the prophet would predict near-term prophetic events, and if they came true then you would know that that was a prophet, and you could trust those prophecies that were further out, or you could believe the message that the prophet was saying. And so, when we think of prophecy, we mustn't think of people forecasting the future, but messengers who come from God as spokesmen for God to encourage the people, God is in control, he is in charge of things despite the way things look, and to exhort them to obey this God.

Dr. Greg Perry

Many people think that the main purpose of biblical prophecy is to make predictions, and we do see some predictions that God makes in Scripture, like that — "a virgin shall conceive and give birth to a child" — and this certainly demonstrates God's sovereignty over history that there can be a predictive element to many prophecies. But that's not the major role of prophecy. The main role of prophecy is that the prophet represents the covenant of God and calls God's people back to covenant faithfulness. We see this very clearly in a passage like Jeremiah 18 where you see this sort of futuristic element that God is going to bring about good things for the nation, unless they are wicked. And then God says, "If you're wicked, I am going to destroy and pull up things from you." And then he says, "I have plans for terrible things, but

if you repent, if you relent of your wicked ways, then I will bring good things to you. I will plant and build you up.” And so, what we see in Jeremiah 18 is this conditional element of biblical prophecy that is connected to the covenant of God, that God offers two paths to his people: as you obey there is a path of blessing in the future; with disobedience the expectation is that God would bring the sanctions of the covenant, the curses of the covenant against you. So, the prophet represents the covenant and calls God’s people to covenant faithfulness.

Dr. Robert K. MacEwen

Well, most biblical prophecy is in the Old Testament, and I really like what Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart said about that in the book *How to Read the Bible for all its Worth*, which is something along the lines of, “The main job and task of the Old Testament prophets was to enforce God’s covenant.” So they were taking the Pentateuch, the Torah, as their starting point. They would go back to that and say, you know, to the people they were talking to “today,” several centuries after Moses, how were they doing in obeying God’s laws and commandments? And most of the time they were not doing very well. So, what they were doing is reminding God’s people, “This is what God said to you through Moses. And this is what you’re supposed to do. You’re not doing it. And by the way, Moses also said these judgments would come upon you for your disobedience.” So, the prophets would remind them of what God had already written in the Pentateuch, warn them of judgment, and exhort them, and encourage them to repent. So, most of the time, the Old Testament prophets were most of all concerned with the situation that was facing them and God’s people in their own day, and only secondarily were they concerned with the future.

Dr. John Oswalt

Many people think that biblical prophecy is primarily for the prediction of the future, but that’s not correct. Prediction of the future is a significant part of it, but primarily, biblical prophecy is marked by the concern of the prophet for the moral nature of the people. And it’s in that context then that prediction comes. If the people will respond to God’s directions, then the future will be hopeful. If they will not respond, then the future will not be hopeful. So, the purpose of biblical prophecy is to call people back to faithful living for God.

Question 11:

Can some prophecies have implicit conditions that are never explicitly stated?

Dr. Craig S. Keener

Biblical prophecies are often conditional, even when those conditions aren’t stated. There are a number of examples of that in Scripture. For example, Elijah is told, and says to Ahab, you know, “You’re in big trouble. This judgment is coming in your time.” But then God later tells Elijah, “Well, Ahab has humbled himself. It’s not going to come in his time; it’s going to come in the time of his descendants” — 1

Kings 21. Also, the prophet Jeremiah says, the Lord tells him, “If I pronounce judgment against a nation, but they turn from their wickedness, then I’ll do good for them. And if I pronounce good on a people, and they turn from my way, then I’ll bring judgment on them.” Again, in Ezekiel 33, you have the same idea where God says he’s going to bring judgment, but he doesn’t really delight in the death of the one who dies. You know, if a person turns from their wickedness, then he’ll bless them. You have the same thing in the book of Jonah where Jonah says, “Forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” Nineveh repents, and Jonah is sorely disappointed.

Dr. Tim Sansbury

So we ask the question about whether a prophecy might have implicit conditions that aren’t expressed in the prophecy itself. In some ways it’s a funny question to ask because, especially as prophecies are uttered from within the covenant, the covenantal relationship between God and the people of Israel, there is an underlying level of implicit condition that is already there in what is being spoken. The prophecy comes out of it, arises consistent with, it’s part of the covenantal relationship. And there are conditions in the covenantal relationship. And so, even if God does not say in a particular place, “I will bless you in this way, so long as you keep my covenant,” if that last part is not included, it is included in the general understanding of prophecy’s operation within the covenant. It’s explicitly stated in Jeremiah 18, and Jeremiah 18 is meant to teach what is implicit in all prophecy everywhere throughout Scripture. So, again, it would almost be easier to say that apart from times when God might be giving prophecy to those outside of the covenantal relationship — in which case they might not have the full... they might not understand the covenants at all; they might not be aware of any conditions and any ways that things might be changed — that all prophecy that occurs to Israel from within the covenantal relationship always carries with it implicit conditions because it is a part and aspect of that covenantal relationship.

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