



**Christian Reflection**  
A Series in Faith and Ethics

**Christian Reflection**

Center for Christian Ethics  
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## Study Guides for **Prophetic Ethics**

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to shed light on the biblical prophetic tradition. Use them individually or in a series. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

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### Suggested Articles:

- 📖 The Wild Goose  
(*Prophetic Ethics*, pp. 40-44)
- 📖 Would That All Were Prophets  
(*Prophetic Ethics*, pp. 9-15)

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# Jesus as a Prophet

Jesus' teachings and actions, which can appear eccentric and mysterious, are often oracles and symbolic actions like those of Israel's prophets. How do Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection promise the return of prophetic guidance to God's people?

## Prayer

**Scripture Readings:** Malachi 2:17-3:2 and 4:5-6; Mark 6:14-16

## Reflection

Many Jewish leaders in Jesus' day believed that the prophets, called "Spirit-bearing people" in Hosea 9:7, were spiritual dinosaurs, creatures of the past. The Babylonian Talmud shares this view: "When Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, the latter prophets, were dead, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel" (Soḥa 48b).

The first Christians rejected this all-the-prophets-are-dead-as-the-dinosaurs view. They, like many first-century Jews, recalled God's promise to send Elijah before the restoration of Israel (Malachi 4:5) and longed for a Spirit-bearing person to return to their land. This explains the mysterious early 'buzz' about Jesus (Mark 6:14-15).

He was more than "just" a prophet, of course. Jesus pressed his closest disciples to discover the deeper truth that he was the Messiah (Mark 8:27-30). Later theologians would speak of the three-fold offices of Christ: he was not only a prophet, but also our priest and king.

"Jesus regarded his ministry as in continuity with, and bringing to a climax, the work of the great prophets of the Old Testament," N. T. Wright concludes. "Like Elijah or Jeremiah, Jesus was proclaiming a message from the covenant god, and living it out with symbolic actions. He was confronting the people with the folly of their ways, summoning them to a different way, and expecting to take the consequences of doing so." †

- ▶ Jesus opened his public ministry with a prophet's call experience, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18; cf. Isaiah 61:1), and proclaimed, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." His ministry would mirror the work of Elijah and Elisha (Luke 4:25-27). Indeed, when Jesus raised a dead man, holy fear seized the crowd and they cried, "A great prophet has risen among us!" (Luke 7:16).
- ▶ Symbolically acting out Malachi 3:1-2, Jesus drove merchants from the outer court of the temple. Quoting from the prophets (Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11), he reproached them for disrupting the temple's witness to the Gentiles (Mark 11:17).
- ▶ Both Jesus' challenge to religious leaders to make their lives match their devotion to the Lord and his hyperbolic language, when he called them "whitewashed tombs" and "a brood of snakes," echo Israel's prophetic tradition (Matthew 23:27-36).
- ▶ Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God reflects a prophetic vision of the restoration of creation. "Isaiah envisions a future time of peace and righteousness, when all creatures will be reconciled, at peace



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with one another and with God (11:1-10). Jesus likewise described the kingdom as a great reversal of rivalries — of great and small, rich and poor, and servants and masters,” Tracy Stout notes. “His was a prophetic vision of God’s future meant to speak to the present day.”

- ▶ On the day of Pentecost, Peter realized that Jesus’ death and resurrection was the ultimate prophetic action, revealing God’s intention to restore Israel and open the floodgate of prophecy predicted by Joel (Acts 2:16-17). This powerful unleashing of the Spirit occurred, Peter concluded, because “God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power” (2:24).

### Study Questions

1. Briefly review the stories about the prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 17-18. How was Jesus’ ministry similar to Elijah’s?
2. What is the relation between Jesus and the prophet Elijah in the story of the Transfiguration in the synoptic gospels (Matthew 17:1-13; cf. Mark 9:2-13; Luke 9:28-36)? Who is identified as fulfilling the prediction in Malachi 4:5 of the return of the prophet Elijah?
3. Why did Jesus’ contemporaries consider him to be a prophet? What are the dangers of interpreting him as “just” a prophet?
4. How does the hymn “O Young and Fearless Prophet” capture some of Jesus’ prophetic teachings and challenges?

### Departing Hymn: “O Young and Fearless Prophet” (verses 1, 4, 5, and 6)

O young and fearless Prophet of ancient Galilee,  
your life is still a summons to serve humanity;  
to make our thoughts and actions less prone to please the  
crowd,  
to stand with humble courage for truth with hearts uncowed.

Stir up in us a protest against our greed for wealth,  
while others starve and hunger and plead for work and  
health;  
where homes with little children cry out for lack of bread,  
who live their years sore burdened beneath a gloomy dread.

Create in us the splendor that dawns when hearts are kind,  
that knows not race nor station as boundaries of the mind;  
that learns to value beauty, in heart, or brain, or soul,  
and longs to bind God’s children into one perfect whole.

O young and fearless Prophet, we need your presence here,  
amid our pride and glory to see your face appear;  
once more to hear your challenge above our noisy day,  
again to lead us forward along God’s holy way.

*S. Ralph Harlow (1931), alt.*  
*Suggested Tune: ST. THEODULPH*

† N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Fortress Press, 1996): 167-168.



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### Focus Article:

📖 Would That All Were Prophets  
(*Prophetic Ethics*, pp. 9-15)

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# Would That All Were Prophets

The New Testament, in addition to designating specific people as prophets, portrays the church as a prophetic voice to the world. What role should prophets play in the church's communal practice of moral discernment?

### Prayer

**Scripture Reading:** Numbers 11:16-17, 24-29; 1 Corinthians 14:26, 29-33.

### Responsive Reading

Come, Holy Lord, Fire and Fountain,  
Through the power of your Spirit,  
help us to worship you in spirit and in truth.

**Help us to hear the words of truth.**

**Help us to speak the words of love.**

**Inspire us, move us, shine within us.**

We open ourselves to you; you know all, see all, and love all.

**Make us instruments of your peace. Amen.**

### Reflection

The prophets of Israel "consistently linked right worship with right living, and idolatry with injustice. They reminded the people ... that their religious observance and how they lived the 'rest' of their lives were inseparable," Stout observes. In this way they were "forth-tellers," messengers who spoke for God to the people of Israel, more than they were foretellers of future events.

The prophets were representative of the task assigned to all Israelites, who were to be prophets to each other and before the world. "Would that all the LORD's people were prophets," Moses replied when Joshua worried that others' prophesying might undermine Moses' authority (Numbers 11:29). Moses wanted all the people to remind one another of their obligations under God's covenant. Furthermore, the Israelites were called to become "a priestly kingdom and holy nation" announcing God's love and judgment before all of the nations (Exodus 16:5-6).

The New Testament exudes a glad welcome of prophecy among the people of God. Both individuals and the church are called to prophetic ministries:

- ▶ The Gospels present Jesus as a prophet, as well as Messiah and Savior. "As the greatest of the prophets, Jesus revealed to us God's intention for the formation of a new type of community [in the church]," writes Stout. "As a new Moses, Jesus instituted a new society; he placed high moral demands upon those in his new covenant, not in order to receive salvation, but to express the salvation they were receiving from God."
- ▶ Prophecy is a spiritual gift from God to members in the church (Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12:8-11; cf. Ephesians 4:11-13). "Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy," the Apostle Paul urged all the members at Corinth, in order to "build up the church" (1 Corinthians 14:1-4). When several prophets speak, church members should listen in an orderly way and collectively "weigh what is said ... so that all may learn



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and all be encouraged" (1 Corinthians 14:29-31; see similar passages in 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22 and 1 John 4:1-3a).

- ▶ Individuals in the Antioch church were designated prophets. Judas and Silas "said much to encourage and strengthen the believers" (Acts 15:32). When Agabus warned members to prepare for a coming famine, they saved money to assist the poorer congregation in Jerusalem (11:28-30). "These prophets, like those in the Old Testament, called their community to its mission and obligations as God's people," Stout notes. "Church members accepted them as authoritative voices as the church discerned how it should act as the body of Christ."
- ▶ In the heavenly worship overheard by the prophet John, "a new song" exalts the Lamb of God for making the church to be "a kingdom and priests serving our God" (Revelation 5:9-10). This song echoes Israel's covenant in Exodus 16:5-6. The entire church is to be a prophetic voice to the world. "My Christian tradition speaks often of the priesthood of all believers, which means that all members are to intercede for and aid one another," Stout concludes. "We also should speak of the *prophethood* of all believers. All people in the church—whether pastors, deacons, or Sunday school teachers, grandmothers or youth, theologians or novelists—have opportunities for putting the church back on track when it wanders into peripheral paths and issues."

### Study Questions

1. Are there people, either on the world or national scene, who are prophetic voices for the Christian community today? Who is calling the church to appraise the relationship between its worship and its life?
2. Are there individuals in your congregation who frequently are prophetic voices for your Christian community? How do they communicate their message, and how does your church weigh their announcement?
3. What concerns do you have about the church relying upon prophetic guidance? Are these concerns addressed in the New Testament passages in this study?
4. Acts 21:7-14 offers an extended look at prophecy in the early church. What do we learn about prophets and evaluating their prophecy, or "testing the spirits," in this passage?
5. Discuss Stanley Hauerwas' view of the church's prophetic role: "Prophecy is no longer solely the role of specific individuals, although individual prophets will, I hope, still be present. It is the community itself that is now prophetic, for it is a community formed by the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, which means that it cannot be what it is without understanding itself to be accountable to the great prophets of Israel" (*Prophetic Ethics*, p. 62).
6. How does the hymn "Come Holy Ghost, Our Hearts Inspire" (*Prophetic Ethics*, p. 45) portray the role of the Holy Spirit and prophecy in the church?

Departing Hymn: "Come, Holy Ghost, Our Hearts Inspire"





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### Focus Article:

📖 I Am About to Do a  
New Thing  
(*Prophetic Ethics*, pp. 16-  
23)

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# I Am About to Do a New Thing

The kaleidoscopic portrait of God's power in the prophetic texts both comforts and confuses us. Some passages shock us with their brutality. Yet in the prophetic tradition there is a compelling vision of power that can transform the whole of creation, if only we have eyes to see and minds to perceive it.

## Prayer

**Scripture Reading:** Micah 4:1-4

## Reflection

As Israel developed as a nation state in the tenth century B.C., after the reign of King David, the locus of power shifted away from village community leaders—elders, judges, priests, and prophets—to the king who ruled over the people. At the same time, Israel's language about power and God began to change. "'Dominion,' which once was associated with *keeping, tilling, and caring* in the creation accounts (Genesis 1-2; Psalms 104:1-30), took on new nuances of *power over, domination, and control*, especially as social classes and economic strata emerged in Israelite society and as kings abused royal power," Dempsey writes. "For many Israelites, God became associated with the ruling male hierarchy of the day; the understanding of God and God's power became likened to the king and the king's power."

Some prophets present God as a powerful and dominating king. Others critique this view and the royal theology from which it flows; they discover that the divine power is expressed in restoration and liberation, and even in non-violence.

- ▶ *Power and domination* (Amos 1:3-2:16). A "royal theology" echoes through the writings of the eighth-century prophets. "Their God exercised justice and sovereignty 'over all,' in the hierarchical manner of their later kings' *domination* instead of the *dominion* associated with the creator God and King David," observes Dempsey. In Amos 1:3-2:16, for instance, though divine power is directed against injustice (land-grabbing warfare, slave trading, exploitation of the poor, and desecration), the text portrays God as exercising power punitively and violently. God's power appears to be "similar to, but greater than any power on earth. It presents a vision of divine power being used to dominate others for the sake of ensuring future justice."
- ▶ *Power, restoration, and liberation* (Jeremiah 50:17-20). Jeremiah comforts the northern kingdom Israel, which had been conquered by the Assyrians around 721-722 B.C. and then ravaged by the Babylonian Empire a century later. God will liberate Israel and punish its oppressors, but at a terrible price to another country. Babylon will be completely destroyed (50:21-51:58); "she shall never again be peopled, or inhabited for all generations" (50:39b).
- ▶ *Power, non-violence, and right relationship* (Isaiah 11:1-9; 42:1-4). These passages speak of the messianic figure, a servant-leader who is empowered by God's spirit to "govern the people with justice and equity, and whose only sword will be his strong and powerful word," Dempsey writes. This servant will counter oppression and bring justice to the nations, but with gentleness and compassion.



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The model of leadership suggested here is non-hierarchical, with the leader's power flowing from the indwelling spirit of God.

Jesus, the Messiah, embodied this vision of the servant-leader. God's divine power enabled him to seek reconciliation with those who executed him (Luke 22:34), and he passes this power to generations of disciples (Luke 24:49; John 20:22; Acts 1:8). God's power "is a blessing ... that has been poured out upon and entrusted to the community of believers," Dempsey concludes. "We, as members of this community living in a terrorist-torn and threatened world that totters on the brink of ecological disaster, are called to exercise this divine power, this divine spirit, and to help set it free within others as well."

### Study Questions

1. What can we learn from each of the three visions of God's power described in this study?
2. Is it important how we understand God's power? What difference does it make in our personal lives, our communities, and our national policies?
3. Comment on Dempsey's conclusion: "With Jesus, we have a mission to be carried out and a baptism to be received. In this regard, God's power is a curse because like Jeremiah and Jesus, we will have to go where we would rather not go, say what we would rather not say, and do what we would rather not do. We are the servants, the leaders of the new day spoken about by the prophets."
4. How does the hymn "O Young and Fearless Prophet" depict Jesus' divine power? What lesson does it draw for our day?

### Departing Hymn: "O Young and Fearless Prophet" (verses 1, 2, 3, and 6)

O young and fearless Prophet of ancient Galilee,  
your life is still a summons to serve humanity;  
to make our thoughts and actions less prone to please the  
crowd,  
to stand with humble courage for truth with hearts uncowed.

We marvel at the purpose that held you to your course  
while ever on the hilltop before you loomed the cross;  
your steadfast face set forward where love and duty shone,  
while we betray so quickly and leave you there alone.

O help us stand unswerving against war's bloody way,  
where hate and lust and falsehood hold back your holy sway;  
forbid false love of country that blinds us to your call,  
who lifts above the nations the unity of all.

O young and fearless Prophet, we need your presence here,  
amid our pride and glory to see your face appear;  
once more to hear your challenge above our noisy day,  
again to lead us forward along God's holy way.

*S. Ralph Harlow (1931), alt.*

*Suggested Tune: ST. THEODULPH*



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### Focus Article:

📖 *Prophecy From the Sidelines*  
(*Prophetic Ethics*, pp. 24-31)

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# Prophecy From the Sidelines

Post-exilic prophets characterized the divine purpose differently when the governing power no longer was God's king, but a foreign ruler. What can these prophets teach us about God's work within a pluralist culture?

## Prayer

**Scripture Reading:** 1 Corinthians 1:4-9

## Responsive Reading†

The day of the Lord is at hand, at hand;  
its storms roll up the sky.

**The nations sleep starving on heaps of gold;  
all dreamers toss and sigh.**

The night is darkest before the morn;  
when the pain is sorest the child is born,  
**and the day of the Lord is at hand, at hand,  
the day of the Lord is at hand.**

Who would sit down and sigh for a lost age of gold,  
while the Lord of all ages is here?

**True hearts will leap at the trumpet of God,  
and those who can suffer can dare.**

Each old age of gold was an iron age, too,  
and the meekest of saints may find stern work to do  
**in the day of the Lord at hand, at hand,  
in the day of the Lord at hand.**

## Reflection

After the exile (586-539 B.C.) prophets were like spectators on the sidelines rather than players in the game: they had little influence on the real political power, the rulers of the Persian Empire. In this situation they proclaimed different messages about God's future redemption on the "day of the Lord." "For the first Christians, this disagreement among post-exilic prophetic texts became a rich resource for proclaiming the good news," Redditt observes. "In Jesus and the church, they declared, the longed-for restoration of Israel had occurred in the most unexpected way."

- ▶ *Hope for a New Kingdom* (Haggai 2:20-23): For Haggai and Zechariah, the day of the Lord would mark a return to the pre-exilic days of Judah's glory, with a restoration of the temple and the monarchy under Zerubbabel, a member of David's royal family, who would be God's "signet ring." These prophets urged Zerubbabel and a high priest named Joshua to rebuild the temple in 519 B.C. "Neither Zechariah nor Haggai was prepared to color outside of the lines of pre-exilic institutions, and neither spoke of admitting the other nations to the temple," Redditt notes. "Their agenda stands in contrast with the hopes expressed in Isaiah 56:6-8, which celebrates the sabbath and the temple by insisting that even foreigners will be welcome in the temple."
- ▶ *Critique of the Hope* (Zechariah 9:16-10:3; 14:20-21): Just two generations later, the hope for restoring the kingdom had





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taken quite a turn. Zerubbabel had not become king and the temple was controlled by irresponsible priests. Malachi condemned the priests for showing contempt for God by their laxity in sacrifice and the people for participating in sorcery, committing adultery, bearing false witness in court, failing to keep oaths, and oppressing the poor hired workers, orphans, widows, and resident aliens (Malachi 3:1-5). The day of the Lord would bring judgment on the people of Judah. The second part of the book of Zechariah (chapters 9-14) echoes this critique. God would restore Judah, but only if its priests and prophets repented and were cleansed. A remarkable passage, Zechariah 14:20-21, predicts that the holiness of the temple would pervade Judah, making even the everyday work animals holy and cooking pots sacred (cf. 12:7).

▶ *Joel's Inclusive Vision* (Joel 2:10-14, 28-29): The book of Joel promises that when the people truly repent with mourning and fasting, the day of the Lord will bring freedom from foreign domination (3:12-17, 21), fertility for their land (2:18-27; 3:18), and a pouring out of God's spirit of prophecy on all people (2:28-29). "This last promise is remarkable for its inclusiveness," observes Redditt, "embracing all classes and both genders of Judeans, though not foreigners."

The post-exilic prophets were forced to rethink their expectations for God's salvation for the people. Haggai and Zechariah hoped for a return to pre-exilic ways of life, especially the monarchy and temple. Malachi and Zechariah 9-14 critiqued post-exilic politics in which leaders had compromised too much with the Persian conquerors. Joel and Isaiah 56-66 anticipated a more egalitarian society, with other nations being welcomed at the temple and into God's favor.

Like these post-exilic prophets, the Apostle Paul anticipated "the day of the Lord" as a time of judgment and renewal. The Corinthians, "called to be saints together with those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ," should be growing in knowledge and spiritual gifts. Jesus will sustain them and bring them "blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul's final word: "God is faithful" (1 Corinthians 1:2-9).

### Study Questions

1. What similarities do you see among the post-exilic prophets' expectations that are discussed in this study?
2. How is our pluralist culture similar to the culture in which these post-exilic prophets lived? How is it different?
3. What can we learn from these post-exilic prophetic visions that might help us to understand God's work in our pluralist culture?
4. Read 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11. Compare Paul's teachings about the day of the Lord to prophetic themes from Haggai, Zechariah 9-14, and Joel, which are discussed in this study.
5. How does the hymn "The Day of the Lord is at Hand" express themes found in the post-exilic prophets' expectations for the day of the Lord?

Departing Hymn: "Come, Holy Ghost, Our Hearts Inspire"

†Charles Kingsley, "The Day of the Lord is At Hand"



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### Focus Article:

📖 Extreme Virtues  
(*Prophetic Ethics*, pp. 63-67)

### Suggested Article:

📖 Lord Have Mercy  
(*Prophetic Ethics*, pp. 71-74)

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# Extreme Virtues

As disciples of Jesus, we are called to exhibit the extreme virtues which characterized the lives and teachings of Israel's prophets, such as justice, steadfast love, and humility.

### Prayer

Scripture Reading: Micah 6:1-8

### Responsive Reading

Lord, we confess to you,  
in the presence of our sisters and brothers,  
that we have sinned.

**We have not heeded your words.**

**We hear the prophetic call to return**

**to your ways of humbleness, generosity, and peace;  
yet we turn to other voices that promise us  
power, wealth, and control.**

Forgive us, Lord,  
for our weakness when we are so easily tempted.

Hear these words of confession:

**Send your Spirit**

**into eyes that will see visions of the people we should be,  
into hands that will help lead us back onto the path,  
into voices that will sing songs enticing us to holiness,  
and even into us, that we might grow to know your love.**

**Amen.**

### Reflection

The people of Israel often exploited the vulnerable, rather than care for them; they embraced violence and war, instead of loving their enemies; and they worshiped idols, not Yahweh alone. God was not pleased. With their extreme behaviors Israel's prophets personified God's rebuke and call to repentance; they called the people of Israel to extreme commitment and discipleship.

What does extreme discipleship look like? Micah points out three virtues: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.

- ▶ *Justice*: The call to do justice echoes through the prophetic writings. "Let justice roll down like waters," Amos thunders as he compares it to a raging river flowing over a parched desert of injustice (Amos 5:24). Justice requires fair treatment of all people. "It means the full inclusion of everyone in the life of the community," particularly the poor and weak. "As an ethical demand or principle," Fillingim points out, "justice is about restoring the marginalized to their rightful place as full participants in the community."

Justice for the poor involves our social, professional, and economic relationships, as well as our personal relationships.

Treating lower-wage workers as equals, supporting political candidates who redress the needs of the poor and marginalized, not supporting businesses when they are involved in unfair practices, and volunteering with relief organizations that help the poor are first steps toward embodying justice.



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► *Steadfast Love*: “Mercy,” “faithfulness,” and “loving-kindness” are other translations of Micah’s word, *hesed*. It is a word used to describe God’s covenant love for us, even when we waver in our love and devotion to God. “Here we have an important lesson about virtue in general and the virtue of steadfast love in particular,” Fillingim notes: God instructs us to deal with others, not as they treat us, but as God cares for us. God calls us to practice loving-kindness in all of our relationships, with strangers, friends, loved ones, and God, despite “the changeableness of religious feelings” or of our emotions toward other people.

Hosea paints a beautiful picture of God’s *hesed*. God’s heart aches for the Israelites who have committed spiritual adultery by worshipping idols. Instead of chastising them, God extends mercy. Though our imitating this divine behavior would run contrary to the world’s standards, God calls us “to give freely of mercy because it has been freely given to us,” Slaton observes.

► *Humility*: True humility makes justice and mercy possible. When we oppress and mistreat others, we act as though we are superior to them in a fundamental way. This shows a lack of humility, says Fillingim, “a failure to accept our true standing in relation to God.” In truth, we are utterly dependent; “our talents, our opportunities, our material resources, our loved ones, are all gifts from God.” None of these provide us a basis for thinking more highly of ourselves than others.

### Study Questions

1. Fillingim emphasizes several “small steps” to help us “grow toward having our lives characterized by justice,” particularly in relation to the poor and marginalized in our society. What other small steps might you take as an individual, or with your study group or congregation? Do you agree that small steps are the place for us to start?
2. What small steps might help us to grow in steadfast love toward our families, friends, strangers, and God?
3. Discuss Fillingim’s comment: “While charity is no substitute for economic justice, charitable work is consistent with compassion for the poor.” Why is it important to distinguish economic justice from charity?
4. Does practicing mercy, or steadfast love, have no limits? Consider the prayer from the Ravensbruck concentration camp, which Lea Slaton quotes (p. 74). What would it take for a person to reach this level of divine imitation?
5. Do you agree with Fillingim that spiritual poverty plays an important role in forming the virtues of justice and steadfast love?

**Departing Hymn: “Lord, Speak to Me, That I May Speak”**



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 The Prophet as Storyteller  
(*Prophetic Ethics*, pp. 75-81)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:  
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# The Prophet as Storyteller

With stories, prophets can slip past our mental defenses, stimulate our moral imagination, and deliver unexpected emotional jolts. From the prophet Nathan to Flannery O'Connor, their storytelling reaches into our hearts, not just our heads.

### Prayer

Scripture Reading: 2 Samuel 11:27b-12:7a

### Responsive Reading

Lord, we confess to you,  
in the presence of our sisters and brothers,  
we have sinned.

**We hide our sins from ourselves.  
just as we hide them from each other.**

Forgive us, Lord,  
for we have marred the picture of fellowship  
and misheard the melody that helps us dance closer to you.  
Lord, hear these words of repentance:

### Send your Spirit

**into eyes to see visions of the people we can be,  
into hands to help lead us back onto the path,  
into voices to sing songs enticing us to holiness,  
and even into us, that we might grow to know your love.**

Amen.

### Reflection

Nathan used "his prophetic imagination in order to stimulate David's moral imagination." Rather than *tell* the moral truth, Nathan *pictured* it. He employed the subversive power of storytelling to slip past the King's mental defenses and penetrate his emotional callousness. The prophet out-flanked David's rationalizations and trumped his spiritual apathy.

Nathan understood that often we need more than knowledge of right and wrong. "As individuals and a society we become numb to the bad choices we have made and are no longer able to see our sin," Bieber notes. "Prophets understand *how* people change. They understand 'the possibility of change as linked to emotional extremities of life.' In other words, prophets know that we do not need better understanding—we need a jolt."

Twentieth-century writer Flannery O'Connor's profound fiction embodies two characteristics of biblical prophecy:

- ▶ *Defamiliarization*. We overlook personal and social sinful distortions when they look ordinary; "That's just the way the world works," we say blithely. Nathan got David to see clearly by putting his sin in a different context, on another sort of character in the story. O'Connor used "the grotesque to make what is truly perverse actually *appear* perverse."
- ▶ *Identification and Discovery*. O'Connor told one story more than any other, the journey of the hardheaded, misguided character who uncovers, like David, the unsettling truth of who they truly are. The key to prophetic storytelling is to shock audiences with the jolt of self-revelation. "To the hard of hearing



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you shout," remarks O'Connor, "and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures."

In her first novel, *Wise Blood*, O'Connor critiqued contemporary America through the degraded fictional city of Taulkinham, whose people worship only their "own desires as reflected in America's newest God: capitalism." A flashy peddler, Onnie Jay Holy, hawks his church of cheap grace that you can join for a dollar: "It's based on your own personal interpretation of the Bible, friends," Holy says, "You can sit at home and interpret your own Bible however you feel in your heart it ought to be interpreted." The protagonist's name, "Hazel Motes," points to the story's central theme, Bieber writes: "he has a mote in his eye, but his story will reveal the plank in our own." Hazel proclaims a "Church Without Christ," in order to escape his (admittedly misguided) Christian upbringing and to embrace a life of sin like everyone else. This reluctant prophet, however, cannot rid himself of Jesus: "Haze's 'wise blood' teaches him that how he lives and what he believes does matter, and that this is not a world where anything goes."

Hazel needs an emotional jolt to knock him out of sin's complacency and the numbness that consumerism cultivates. Often the reality of death is the shock O'Connor uses to awaken her characters, and her readers, to their jeopardy.

In O'Connor's story "Revelation," we recognize ourselves in the character of Ruby Turpin, "a southern white landowner who is proud of her property and her social standing," Bieber writes. She is "so self-satisfied and self-serving that she cannot see anything wrong with herself but can easily dole out judgments on others." An eye-opening message from God delivered by an unlikely prophetess shatters Ruby's self-righteousness.

Imagination enables us to see by analogy who and what we are in reality. Prophets and storytellers understand this. They tell stories "to displace us in order to put us in our place, to remind us that we are the *created* and not the *Creator*."

### Study Questions

1. Review Flannery O'Connor's description of 1940's and 1950's America (pp. 76-77). What spiritual sickness does she note? To what does this sickness lead?
2. In *Wise Blood*, through characters like the religious salesman Onnie Jay Holy and Hazel Motes, O'Connor took critical jabs at American Protestantism. Do you share her concerns?
3. When characters face death in O'Connor's writings, it becomes a moment of revelation for them or redemption for others. How can facing death sometimes deliver the emotional jolt we need to see ourselves rightly? How can it open up the possibility of our conversion?
4. Identify other prophets in the Bible or church history who use stories to communicate a message from God. Which contemporary writers are prophetic storytellers?

Departing Hymn: "In Their Speaking, Art, and Writing"





## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 The Sign of Jonah  
(*Prophetic Ethics*, pp 54-59)

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# The Sign of Jonah

Jesus' mysterious invocation of "the sign of Jonah" became, for Christians facing persecution and death in the early third century, a promise of God's ultimate act of grace and deliverance: resurrection from the dead.

### Prayer

**Scripture Reading: Matthew 12:38-41**

### Responsive Reading†

The LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish:

**I called to the LORD out of my distress and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me.**

Then he said, "I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?" The waters closed in over him; the deep surrounded him; weeds were wrapped around his head at the roots of the mountains.

**I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you raised me up from the Pit, O LORD. As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. I, with the voice of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the LORD!**

Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

### Reflection

"In their speaking, art, and writing, in their music, hear God's voice. Why composer, painter, poet, why the note and color choice?" begins Terry York's new hymn (*Prophetic Ethics*, p. 51). The Jonah marbles, which are a rare artistic creation dating to the third century A.D., and the many appearances of Jonah scenes on early Christian sarcophagi and catacomb paintings, indicate this story was one of the first narratives depicted in Christian art. These artistic expressions reveal important clues about the early church's theological imagination.

"Early Christians interpreted Old Testament prophecies and events as announcing and prefiguring the ministry of Jesus or the church." writes Hornik. "Their interpretation of the book of Jonah was inspired by Jesus' mysterious rebuke of some religious leaders demanding a prophetic sign."

Their demand followed Jesus' healing of a man's withered hand (Matthew 12:9-14), curing crowds of sick people (12:15), and returning speech and sight to a demoniac (12:22-23). By asking for a "sign," the religious leaders were not seeking additional miraculous healings; even Beelzebul can perform miracles and wonders, they charged (12:24)! Instead, they demanded an



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exceptional signal that would prove Jesus was God's messenger.

"No sign will be given," Jesus warned them, "except the sign of the prophet Jonah" (12:39). Jesus saw the time he would spend in the belly of the earth, between his death and resurrection, as prefigured by Jonah's three days in the belly of the fish.

Four of the Jonah marbles, *Jonah Swallowed*, *Jonah Praying*, *Jonah Cast Up*, and *Jonah Under the Gourd Vine*, depict this sign. The Jonah motif bore rich meaning for early Christians during persecution. They found hope in the "sign of Jonah," which pointed to the resurrection of Jesus and so promised their own deliverance from death.

What are we to make of *The Good Shepherd*, the fifth marble figure in the set? Including the Good Shepherd reminded believers that the same Christ who offered his life for the salvation of the world also watched over them as they faced persecution and death. Jesus Christ is the loving shepherd and savior of those who believe in him.

### Study Questions

1. Compare two Gospel passages, Matthew 12:38-42 and Luke 11:29-32, that mention the "sign of Jonah." What similarities and differences do you find in these passages?
2. The sculptor of the Jonah marbles integrated well-known motifs from pagan culture, Hornik notes. What benefit did this have for the early church? Could this jeopardize the Christian message? Do contemporary artists use non-Christian motifs in ways that successfully communicate the gospel?
3. After Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in 313, artists portrayed Christ less as a simple shepherd and more as a majestic Caesar. Reflect on this development in the church's visual art and theology.

### Departing Hymn: "Praise Him, Praise Him" (verses 1 and 3)

Praise Him! Praise Him! Jesus, our blessed Redeemer!  
Sing, O Earth, His wonderful love proclaim!  
Hail Him! Hail Him! Highest archangels in glory;  
Strength and honor give to His holy Name!  
Like a shepherd, Jesus will guard His children,  
In His arms He carries them all day long.

*Praise Him! Praise Him! Tell of His excellent greatness.  
Praise Him! Praise Him! Ever in joyful song!*

Praise Him! Praise Him! Jesus, our blessed Redeemer!  
Heav'nly portals loud with hosannas ring!  
Jesus, Savior, reigneth forever and ever.  
Crown Him! Crown Him! Prophet, and Priest, and King!  
Christ is coming! Over the world victorious,  
Pow'r and glory unto the Lord belong.

*Fanny Crosby (1869)*

†Adapted from Jonah 1:17-2:10 (NRSV).

## Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.

Each lesson plan is for a 30 to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

# Jesus as a Prophet

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Question 3 or 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching goals

1. To appreciate the continuities between Jesus' ministry and Israel's prophet tradition.
2. To interpret specific words and deeds of Jesus as prophetic oracles and symbolic actions.
3. To explore how, in the gospels, Jesus' ministry heralds the return of prophecy to God's people and the restoration of Israel.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Prophetic Ethics (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus articles before the group meeting. Locate the tune ST. THEODULPH in your church's hymnal.

## Begin with a Story

On the Sunday after Jesus' crucifixion, two disciples were deep in conversation when they met a stranger. "What are you talking about?" the man asked them. "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know ... about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him?" Cleopas replied. "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." Notice that the disciples already understood that Jesus was a prophet sent to redeem Israel. Soon they would understand more, when the curious stranger broke the bread for their supper: he was Jesus, now resurrected from the dead!

This story in Luke 24:13-35 reminds us that with their first glimpse, incomplete though it was, the disciples saw Jesus as a prophet in Israel's tradition. The gospel invites us to join the disciples in looking at Jesus this way, so that we may also, like them, see him as our risen Lord.

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Voice a request that members will experience the excitement, fulfillment, and fear of those people in the crowd who welcomed Jesus, exclaiming: "A great prophet has risen among us!"

## Scripture Reading

Ask one member to read Malachi 2:17-3:2 and 4:5-6, and another member to read Mark 6:14-16 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

"Jesus regarded his ministry as in continuity with, and bringing to a climax, the work of the great prophets of the Old Testament," the theologian and New Testament scholar N. T. Wright observes. For Christians, this should be sufficient reason to study Israel's prophetic tradition. As we appreciate the continuities between Jesus and Israel's prophets, we will better understand Jesus' actions and teachings.

This lesson surveys five points of continuity: Jesus' opening description of his ministry as fulfilling the

prophet's calling and echoing Elijah's and Elisha's work; his symbolic action of cleansing the temple; his use of hyperbolic language to call religious leaders to repentance; the shape of his teaching about the kingdom of God; and the prophetic action of his death and resurrection.

The New Testament welcomes the return of prophecy to God's people in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This theme will be explored in the next lesson. Here you might note how the gospels interpret Jesus' life as the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy. Later, when Christians formed their canon, they positioned the book of Malachi at the end of the Old Testament so that the prophet's prediction would serve as a transition to Matthew's gospel.

### *Study Questions*

1. You might assign a member or small group to survey these four stories in 1 Kings 17-18: Elijah called on God's power to continually replenish the bread of a foreigner, the widow in Sidon (17:8-16), and to restore her son to life (17:17-24). He confronted King Ahab and prophets of Baal (18:17-40); then he announced the end of Israel's three and a half year famine (18:41-45). Members may see similarities between the first two events and Jesus' miracles. Elijah called on Israel to abandon idols and worship the Lord. Jesus also called the people to repentance, corrected their religious leaders, symbolically cleansed the temple, and announced the Kingdom of God.
2. Jesus' ministry is continuous with that of Moses, the great lawgiver, and Elijah, the prophetic precursor of the Messiah. His shining countenance (Matthew 17:2) and the voice of God (17:5) designate Jesus alone as divine. "Elijah has already come," Jesus said, in John the Baptist (17:12-13).
3. His disciples on the road to Emmaus described him as "Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people" (Luke 24:19). This suggests that both his miracles and powerful teachings showed that the Spirit of God was evident in his ministry. Members may mention specific instances that reveal to them the presence of the Spirit in Jesus' deeds and words. [You might refer to these passages: One crowd spread the word that Jesus was a "great prophet" after he raised the son of a widow (Luke 7:16-17). The Samaritan woman at Jacob's well called Jesus a prophet after he revealed her sordid personal life (John 4:19). The crowd that was fed when Jesus multiplied the bread and fish concluded he was "the prophet who is to come into the world" (John 6:14). The man born blind, after he was healed, said "He is a prophet" (John 9:17).] While the category of "prophet" helps us to appreciate Jesus' ministry and the reaction of the people to him, it does not capture all that Jesus means to the world. He is more than one among many "Spirit-bearing people."
4. This prayer to Jesus, "the young and fearless Prophet," confesses that we are tempted to depart from "God's holy way" in order to "please the crowd." We need "hearts uncowed" because the crowd's pressure is great, and focused attention on Jesus because it is difficult to hear his "challenge above our noisy day." Notice how we can fall into hypocrisy, just like those "whitewashed tombs" among the religious leaders in Jesus' day: we may become greedy for wealth and ignore the jobless and sick, or become provincial in our friendships and attitudes, forgetting the wideness and inclusiveness of God's kingdom.

### *Departing Hymn*

Verses 1, 4, 5, and 6 of "O Young and Fearless Prophet" are printed in the study guide. The suggested tune, ST. THEODULPH, should be familiar, for it is usually paired with the text "All Glory, Laud, and Honor." If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.



# Would That All Were Prophets

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)

### Teaching goals

1. To survey how the New Testament welcomes prophecy.
2. To consider who might be a prophetic voice in the world today, calling the church to examine its worship and actions.
3. To explore how the church is called to have a prophetic witness in the world.

### Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Prophetic Ethics (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

### Begin with a Story

“Sometimes church-life might be simpler without prophets and prophecy. One church business meeting, in particular, comes to mind.... We were debating a committee’s proposal to build a new sanctuary. One member stood up in the back and announced: ‘The Holy Spirit has told me this week that we should not build this sanctuary, for if we do, the church will grow and we will lose touch with one another. Our fellowship is too precious a gift to risk in this way.’ There was silence for half a minute. Then a member right in front rose to speak: ‘I’ve been praying about this decision too,’ she reported, ‘and the Holy Spirit has spoken clearly to me. We must build this sanctuary in order to extend our ministries to our growing town.’ Now everybody was talking at once.... Fortunately I am equipped with a reasonably loud voice, so as loudly as I could I urged: ‘The Holy Spirit speaks to *us* collectively as a church, when we patiently listen to and carefully weigh these prophecies.’ Actually, we did need to hear both prophecies, for the church needed both to build more space and to heed the counsel to not mistake mere physical growth for spiritual vitality” (Kruschwitz, “The Wild Goose,” *Prophetic Ethics*, pp. 41-42).

### Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Voice a request that members will discern the prophetic voices that are speaking to their group and to the church today.

### Scripture Reading

Ask two members to read Numbers 11:16-17, 24-29 and 1 Corinthians 14:26, 29-33 from a modern translation.

### Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

### Reflection

This lesson highlights two important links between Israel’s prophetic tradition and the church: (1) just as the people of Israel were to be prophets to one another, the New Testament welcomes the guidance of

prophecy in the church; and (2) the church, like Israel, as the gathered people of God, are to be a prophetic witness to God's love and judgment before all the world.

What's the point of the story of Joshua and Moses in Numbers 11? The people misunderstood and complained about God's guidance. Moses could not bear the burden of answering their complaints and relating God's intentions (11:12-14). God provided for seventy prophets to assist Moses. Part of Joshua's concern may be that the two prophets began prophesying without going first to the "tent of meeting" (11:16), the place where God regularly met with Moses. The story highlights that God's Spirit touched them where they were, in the camp.

Briefly highlight four themes from the New Testament materials: (1) the Gospels present Jesus as the greatest prophet, as well as Messiah and Savior [this theme was developed in the first study guide, "Jesus as a Prophet"]; (2) prophecy is a spiritual gift from God to members in the church; (3) some individuals were designated as prophets, perhaps because they exercised the gift of prophecy often or in memorable ways; and (4) the church as a community should be a prophetic voice to the world.

You might use the study questions to explore only one or two of these themes.

### **Study Questions**

1. Members may mention Christian leaders or politicians, writers or musicians, missionaries or evangelists who are prophetic voices. Some, like Mother Theresa, might be relatively uncontroversial; others who are mentioned might spark disagreement. Ask members to discuss whether a prophet is likely to be uncontroversial, even among committed people of God. Some members may mention non-Christian voices that the church needs to hear. Could the Spirit of God be speaking a word to the church through these individuals?
2. Members may name individuals who have spoken words of wise counsel on important issues, or who offer guidance as they counsel, teach, or preach. Are their prophetic messages discussed formally in church business session or by an appointed group or committee, or more informally among members in the church?
3. Prophecies might be difficult to interpret, seem to disagree with one another, or be clear to only some members. Some prophets may be better 'talkers' than 'listeners,' and they fail to appreciate what others have to contribute. The later New Testament writings warn that "false prophets" may mislead and misinform intentionally in order to gain control or power. Others, who think they are speaking a prophetic word, may themselves become confused about God's message. The New Testament calls for careful communal evaluation of the prophecies presented to the church.
4. Members might mention the prominence of women prophets in this passage, the prophetic *symbolic action* by Agabus, and Paul's careful evaluation of Agabus' action.
5. Since Jesus' ministry and teaching were continuous with the great prophets of Israel, so his new community, the church, has a responsibility to embody those prophetic concerns before the world. How can your church, as a community, do prophetic actions or make prophetic statements? Are congregations always correct when they attempt to speak or act on God's word? How do we "test these spirits?"
6. The hymn celebrates the Holy Spirit, the "source of the old prophetic fire," for inspiring us to understand and apply Scripture, revealing to us our sin and bringing light to our "disordered spirits," and revealing to us the depth of divine love. The prophetic voice has these tasks in the church and before the world.

### **Departing Hymn**

"Come, Holy Ghost, our Hearts Inspire" is reprinted on pp. 45-46 of *Prophetic Ethics*. The suggested tune, AZMON, should be familiar, for it is usually paired with the text "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing." If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

# I Am About to Do a New Thing

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Isaiah 11:1-9; 42:1-4
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (review all)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 2	Questions 3 and 4
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To distinguish three aspects of the complex portrait of God's power in Israel's prophetic texts.
2. To interpret difficult prophetic passages which shock us with their brutality.
3. To understand how Jesus interpreted and revealed God's power as the Messiah.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Prophetic Ethics (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

## Begin with a Story

Tell the group where you were on September 11, 2001, and how you found out about the attack on the World Trade Center in New York City. How should we respond? What does it mean to act in God's power in this situation? "The message of Jesus on September 10 was still the same on September 12," Cynthia Hockman-Chupp reminds us. "Jesus' message remains true today" (*Where Was God on September 11? A Study Guide for Congregations* [Herald Press, 2002]). Yet applying Jesus' message and understanding God's power has never been more difficult for us.

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Voice a request that members will experience God's power as a blessing that is liberating and restorative for all the creation.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a member to read Micah 4:1-4 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

This lesson presents three motifs within the portrait of God's power in Israel's prophetic tradition. Dempsey does not recommend that we isolate these strands and then choose from among them, but that we should interpret them together sensitively and within the context of Jesus' ministry. "Throughout the Old and New Testaments, particularly in the prophets, these varied expressions of power shift, interact, and intersect with one another," Dempsey observes. "When interpreted together, these shifts reveal not only the human condition but also the divine vision of the goal of the created order, which is life lived freely, fully, and in peace with God, one another, and all creation" (*Prophetic Ethics*, p. 22).

The scripture reading from Micah 4:1-4 frames the lesson by presenting a vision of God's intended future. The question naturally arises, "How will God bring about this peaceful future world when there is today so much human oppression and opposition to God's ways?" Of course, the prophets teach that God is powerful enough to accomplish the divine plan, though they describe God's power differently.

Three key passages exemplify the presentations of God's power as domination, as restoration and liberation, and as non-violent servant-leadership. As time permits, the group may want to discuss these passages thoroughly. If you extend this lesson over two sessions, you might reserve the discussion of the third presentation (of servant-leadership exemplified in Jesus' ministry) for the second session.

### *Study Questions*

1. Members may be shocked by the brutality and violence associated with God's power in the domination and liberation motifs. Yet, there is value in understanding God as "over" earthly powers; for instance, the book of Revelation echoes the themes of God's moral seriousness and complete victory over evil. The third motif, the servant-leader motif, shows the incompleteness of the vision of God as king; it also warns about our potential violent misuse of that vision.
2. We want to use power in our personal lives, communities, and nation in ways that honor God. If our model of God's power focuses only on domination, we may resort to responding quickly with violent force to dominate others. If Jesus' servanthood is our model of divine power, we may tend toward courageous forgiveness and reconciliation. You might illustrate these two different stances with contemporary examples; for instance, how would each stance apply to the current "war on terrorism" or call for war with Iraq?
3. Dempsey points out that acting in the power of God does not mean acting with overwhelming violence against our and God's enemies. We are not protected with superior force, but remain vulnerable to sacrificial suffering on behalf of enemies. (Jeremiah 20:7-18 expresses the prophet's anguish as he speaks God's word to the inattentive, uncaring, and abusive religious leadership of his day.)
4. The hymn is a prayer to Jesus to "help us stand unswerving against war's bloody way." Jesus' "humble courage" and single-minded purpose to embody God's love, even "while ever on the hilltop before [him] loomed the cross," should be our model. The hymn suggests why it is difficult to follow Jesus: we are tempted by "false love of country," "our pride and glory," and the competing ways of using power that clamor for our attention in "our noisy day." Our first challenge, then, is simply "to see [Jesus'] face appear" and "once more to hear [his] challenge" clearly.

### *Departing Hymn*

Verses 1, 2, 3, and 6 of "O Young and Fearless Prophet" are printed in the study guide. The suggested tune, ST. THEODULPH, should be familiar, for it is usually paired with the text "All Glory, Laud, and Honor." If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

# Prophecy From the Sidelines

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (post-exilic prophets)	Reflection (New Testament)
Question 2 and 3	Questions (selected)	Question 1 and 2	Questions 3, 4, and 5
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To compare three ways that post-exilic prophets envision the “day of the Lord.”
2. To understand how the New Testament views the church as playing a central role in God’s gracious activity envisioned by the post-exilic prophets.
3. To reflect on how God’s work continues within a pluralist culture.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passages referenced in the guide. Distribute copies of *Prophetic Ethics (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

## Prayer & Scripture Reading

Invite members to share personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Close the prayer time by having a member read 1 Corinthians 1:4-9 from a modern translation.

## Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold.

## Reflection

The lesson surveys three differing expectations in the post-exilic prophets about God’s future redemption of the people. (If you extend the group discussion over two sessions, you might explore the post-exilic prophecies in the first session and then discuss their use in the New Testament in the second session.) You can simplify the discussion of these complex prophecies by using only the focal passages about “the day of the Lord,” which is the future time when God’s actions culminate in the salvation of the people. The chart on page 24 summarizes these expectations.

Divide the group into three workgroups to investigate the differing expectations. (Note: in the book of Joel “the army of the Lord” refers to a plague of locust. The battles in Zechariah 9-14, the section of the book that scholars call “Second Zechariah,” are military engagements.)

How did the early Christians see the church as the fulfillment of certain aspects of these prophetic expectations? Paul describes the church as the place where God helps us grow and prepare to welcome the day of the Lord (1 Corinthians 1:4-9), and he warns “sleepers” who are not preparing (1 Thessalonians 5:1-11). When Peter recalls Joel’s vision during the mysterious events of Pentecost (Acts 2:16) and Paul calls the church “the Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16; cf. 3:7-9, 14), they interpret these post-exilic prophecies to include the church. “There is no longer Jew or Greek ... for all of you are one in Christ Jesus,” Paul writes. “And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 6:28-29).



<i>Expectation:</i>	<i>Hope for New Kingdom</i>	<i>Critique of the Hope</i>	<i>Inclusive Vision</i>
<i>Focal Passage:</i>	Haggai 2:20-23	Zechariah 9:16-10:3; and 14:20-21	Joel 2:10-14, 28-29
<i>Prophets:</i>	Haggai, Zechariah	Malachi, Zechariah 9-14	Joel
<i>Main features of expectation:</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• release from foreign rule;</li> <li>• temple rebuilt for Jews;</li> <li>• monarchy restored through Zerubbabel</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• repentance required;</li> <li>• purification of Judah's wayward leaders;</li> <li>• release from foreign rule;</li> <li>• temple's holiness extended through Judah</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• repentance required;</li> <li>• release from foreign rule;</li> <li>• fertility for the land;</li> <li>• God's spirit of prophecy poured on all Judeans</li> </ul>
<i>Additional passages:</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Haggai 1:2-11 and 2:6-9 (rebuild temple);</li> <li>• Zechariah 3:1-10 (restore monarchy &amp; high priest)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Malachi 3:1-5 (purifying the temple and priests);</li> <li>• Zechariah 12:10-13:6 (purify priests &amp; prophets)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Isaiah 56:6-8 (welcome foreigners for sabbath observance and into the temple)</li> </ul>

### Study Questions

- Members might mention some of these similarities: All the prophets expect (1) God's judgment of the nations (though in Haggai and Zechariah the judgment falls primarily upon Judah's oppressors), (2) freedom from foreign oppression, and (3) restoration of God's people. Zechariah 9-14, Malachi, and Joel call upon the people of Judah, especially the religious leaders, to repent. Zechariah 9-14, Joel, and Isaiah 56-66 expect an extension of God's presence in the world, through the holiness of all Judah (Zechariah 9-14), prophesy by all the people (Joel), or foreigners being welcomed into the temple (Isaiah 56-66).
- In the colonial period, different Christian denominations were established in various colonies, but there was nothing similar to a temple or God-ordained monarchy. Our culture is "pluralist" today in the sense that people inhabit different religious traditions and the government does not favor one tradition over the others. The post-exilic prophets lived under a government that was officially uncommitted, favoring neither the Jewish religion nor any foreign religion.
- God's call for justice and sincere worship are still applicable. The inclusive visions of Joel and Isaiah 56-66 suggest that God calls all people to worship and discipleship, and that we should be hospitable in welcoming others to our worship. Members might explore whether our churches are as inviting and faithful as they should be.
- Paul stresses the unexpected arrival of the day of Lord, which will catch some people unprepared. (The simile "like a thief in a night" repeats Jesus' warning in Matthew 24:43-44 and Luke 12:39-40). Those who are caught unprepared are asleep in "darkness;" they dream that they have established "peace and security." God's purpose is to save us in order that we might live with God.
- The hymn, which closely follows 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, refers to the darkening of the day (Joel 2:10; cf. Amos 8:9) and suggests it will catch some people unprepared, like "dreamers [who] toss and sigh." God's deep purpose of establishing justice (hinted in the phrase "the child is born") is the common theme in the post-exilic prophets. As in the prophet tradition, the central sin involves unjust distributions of resources ("the nations sleep starving on heaps of gold"). Malachi and Zechariah 9-14 would resonate with the second verse, which says there was no "lost age of gold" that is preferable to God's new plans.

### Departing Hymn

"Come, Holy Ghost, our Hearts Inspire" is reprinted on pp. 45-46 of *Prophetic Ethics*. The suggested tune, AZMON, should be familiar, for it is usually paired with the text "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing." If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

# Extreme Virtues

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To sketch the extreme virtues of justice, steadfast love, and humility.
2. To consider how these prophetic virtues are integrally related to one another, being grounded in the imitation of God and the recognition of our spiritual poverty.
3. To consider how we may grow in these virtues through regular, small actions.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Prophetic Ethics (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. Locate CANONBURY, the tune for “Lord, Speak to Me, That I May Speak,” in your church’s hymnal.

## Begin with a Story

Retell the story of Sister Helen Prejean, the nun featured in the movie *Dead Man Walking*. Lea Pardue Slayton’s summary of Sister Prejean’s story begins, “We are called as God’s children to be the hands and faces of [God’s] mercy in our unmerciful world” (*Prophetic Ethics*, p. 72).

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Voice a request that members will hear the prophetic call to develop extreme virtues of justice, mercy, and humility.

## Scripture Reading

Ask two members to read Micah 6:1-5 and 6:6-8 from a modern translation.

## Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold.

## Reflection

The scripture reading from Micah 6:1-8 is like observing a courtroom drama. God asks creation (including the mountains, hills and foundations of the earth) to hear his case against the people of Israel. “Oh my people,” cries the Lord in response to Israel’s unfaithfulness, “what have I done to you?” God’s opening argument recounts three defining “saving acts” of God on Israel’s behalf: liberating the people from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 1-15), thwarting Moabite King Balak’s desire to curse the Israelites by inspiring the prophet Balaam to pronounce lavish blessings upon them (Numbers 22-24), and leading the people to cross the Jordan River on dry land from Shittim to Gial (Joshua 3-5:10).

These salvation events seal God’s case against Israel. In sarcastic exasperation Israel shoots back, “Very well, what settlement will please you? Burnt offerings? Rams and rivers of oil? How about our firstborn?” (Micah 6:6-7).

Perhaps the prophet Micah (or is it the mountains and hills of creation?) responds to Israel: these three things God requires—to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

### *Study Questions*

1. Encourage members to brainstorm practical actions they can do, in addition to the ones Fillingim lists, which will foster lifestyles of justice. Encourage them to be specific. What local organizations might they support? When and how? Is there an important issue to raise with their city council or political representatives? Does someone know where to purchase fair-trade goods? Challenge and help one another to put some of these ideas into practice. How might your study group lead your congregation to promote justice?
2. Small steps are easier to take, and they build habits of attention, caring, and reacting that shape all of our actions. You might divide members into smaller working groups to focus upon steadfast love in families, among friends and colleagues, toward strangers, and toward God. Give them time to summarize their ideas and report to the entire study group.
3. When we treat people with economic justice, we provide the goods or services they have a moral right to receive; we are not giving them anything that they do not deserve. Charity, on the other hand, flows from the personal generosity of the giver, and graciously helps someone in need. Justice should be the bare minimum in how we treat the poor, and charity would be a welcome addition.
4. Some members may not be familiar with the story of Sister Helen Prejean and the death-row inmate Matthew Poncelet. Her decision to minister to Poncelet outraged nearly everyone. How could she demonstrate God's love to this self-confessed rapist and murderer when he deserved punishment? How could a Holocaust victim pray for God to forgive the Nazi oppressors? Ask members to respond to these two confounding accounts of mercy.
5. Spiritual poverty means our fundamental lack of worthiness before God's evaluation. "We possess nothing with which we can make ourselves presentable to God," writes Fillingim. "Everything we have stems from God's compassion." By keeping this truth in mind, we can cultivate gratitude and love toward God, and humility toward other people as our equals. Such humility, Fillingim points out, enables justice and steadfast love toward others to flourish; lack of humility precludes these virtues.

### *Departing Hymn*

"Lord, Speak to Me, That I May Speak" is reprinted on p. 49 of *Prophetic Ethics*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

# The Prophet as Storyteller

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Question 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To discover the prophetic power of narratives to communicate divine truth.
2. To identify literary devices prophetic storytellers use to engage our ethical imagination.
3. To recognize that some writers of fiction are also contemporary prophets.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Prophetic Ethics (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

## Begin with a Quote

Read the lines Christina Bieber quotes from renaissance English poet Sir Philip Sidney's "Apology for Poetry." She introduces Sidney's apology with the comment, "Sidney defends the poet from the charge of lying..." (*Prophetic Ethics*, p. 75).

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. End by asking God to give us the eyes and ears that we might discover ourselves in the works of contemporary prophetic storytellers.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 2 Samuel 11:27b-12:7a from a modern translation.

## Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## Reflection

Stories can be dangerous to our self-righteousness and self-deception. After being caught up in their dramatic unfolding, we discover, usually too late, that we are not reading the stories so much as being read by them!

The lesson begins with the well-known account of Nathan's prophetic confrontation with King David. God often directed prophets to speak harsh words to kings and priests, military leaders and wealthy persons, and sometimes the entire community. Occasionally these prophetic messages were heard and heeded; more often they were ignored and the prophets were threatened or killed.

Bieber points out that the means by which prophets announced God's word is often as important as the content of the message. Direct approaches typically engender *interpersonal* conflict, tension between the messenger and the hearer; indirect approaches, such as stories, provoke *intrapersonal* conflict, tension within the hearer. We can note examples of prophetic storytelling in Scripture.

Fiction writers, like Flannery O'Connor, can be insightful and provocative prophetic figures today. Her many short stories and two novels may strike readers as peculiar, hinting that something significant lies waiting to be discovered. She possessed an astute theological mind and explored theological themes of sin, repentance, and redemption in her characters' actions.

Bieber's commentary on O'Connor provides an excellent starting place for exploring this writer's prophetic giftedness. The group might consider working through *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, a popular collection of O'Connor's short stories, for a future study.

### **Study Questions**

1. O'Connor identifies three driving forces in America's deepening spiritual sickness: (1) nihilism, the rejection of human values and meaning; (2) a loss of divine transcendence, or the sense of God's otherness and distinctiveness from human beings; and (3) and the vaporization of religion, substituting individual moral convictions for theologically substantive beliefs about God. Invite members to explore these causes, noting examples in addition to the ones O'Connor points out.

Following O'Connor's trajectory, Bieber says rampant consumerism, which is evident in our worship of and enslavement to our boundless desires, is a symptom of this sickness.

2. O'Connor perceived in Protestant Christianity some very serious shortcomings. Chief among these is the tendency to privilege personal interpretations of Scripture apart from, and sometimes over against, the community of Christian faith and its theological heritage. She also objected to rendering baptism and Holy Communion mere arbitrary symbols, emptied of God's grace and presence. Encourage the group to discuss O'Connor's criticisms as observations from a Christian friend, rather than to defend certain Protestant beliefs or practices.
3. Society numbs itself to death; therefore, as Walter Brueggemann points out, the prophet must proclaim through concrete imagery that death "hovers over us and gnaws within us." When confronted by death, our frailty and finitude come sharply into focus, and we can hear the biblical witness that we are creatures. As with Ruby Turpin, once we are "put in our place," we become open to fresh revelations from God.
4. J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis are well known; others are Dante Alighieri, John Bunyan, John Milton, Herman Melville, Dorothy Sayers, and Walker Percy. Members may mention other writers of popular fiction. Ask members to comment briefly upon the prophetic dimension in the work of the authors they cite.

### **Departing Hymn**

"In Their Speaking, Art, and Writing" is on pp. 51-53 of *Prophetic Ethics*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.



# The Sign of Jonah

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Question 1	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To interpret Jesus' mysterious citation of 'the sign of Jonah.'
2. To reflect on how the early church interpreted an Old Testament prophecy and event in light of the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
3. To appreciate the relationship between Christian artistic imagination and theological reflection.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 14-15 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Prophetic Ethics (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. Locate the hymn "Praise Him, Praise Him" in your church's hymnal.

## Begin with a Quote

Read the quote from N. T. Wright found on p. 61 of *Prophetic Ethics*. It begins, "Jesus regarded his ministry as in continuity with, and bringing to a climax, the work of the great prophets of the Old Testament." In this lesson members can consider Wright's comment with regard to the prophetic message and symbolic acts of Jesus and Jonah.

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude with thanksgiving to God for the promise of new life in Christ, our Savior and Shepherd.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Matthew 12:38-41 from a modern translation.

## Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## Reflection

Jesus chose to reveal his identity and mission cryptically with mystifying remarks, rebukes, and allusions. This is another way in which Jesus was like a number of Israel's prophets. A string of these obscure revelations leads up to the "sign of Jonah" reference in Matthew's gospel. Jesus deliberately violated the Pharisee's interpretation of the sabbath: he and his disciples plucked grain (Matthew 12:1-2) and he healed numerous people (12:9-10, 15, 22). This occasioned a biting accusation from the religious teachers that he was breaking God's sabbath command to rest from all work. In succession, Jesus proclaims "something greater than the temple is here" (12:6), hints that something greater than the sabbath is at hand (12:12), and declares "something greater than Jonah is here! ... [and] something greater than Solomon is here!" (12:41-42). To those who doubted Jesus' authenticity as God's messenger, only the "sign of Jonah," a remarkable deliverance from the power of death, would reveal him to be the Christ. And some would not even accept that demonstration (see Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31, especially verses 30-31).

The Jonah Marbles show an early Christian interpretation of the “sign of Jonah.” *Jonah Swallowed*, *Jonah Cast Up*, and *Jonah Under the Gourd Vine* reference events in the book of Jonah to represent the death, resurrection, and paradisaical bliss of Jesus. *Jonah Praying* may depict Jonah’s petition from the belly of the fish, which is quoted in the responsive reading, or his prayer of thanksgiving for deliverance from the fish.

### Study Questions

1. Although these passages share a number of similarities, members may note a curious difference. In Matthew, Jesus clearly identifies the “sign of Jonah” as the prophet’s deliverance from the belly of the fish after three days and nights. Just as God rescued Jonah from apparent death, God would raise Jesus from the grave (12:40).

What Jesus meant by the sign of Jonah, according to Luke’s account, is less clear. “For just as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh,” he says, “so the Son of Man will be to this generation” (Luke 11:30). How was Jonah a sign to Nineveh? Perhaps the people of Nineveh heard of his miraculous experience at sea, but would not believe such a wild tale from an Israelite. Perhaps the sign of Jonah was the prophet’s proclamation of God’s impending wrath for Nineveh’s evil ways and love of war (cf. Jonah 3:8b). Just as Jonah announced God’s coming judgment against people’s love of sin and violence, so too did Jesus warn “this generation” and call them to repentance. Therefore, since one greater than Jonah is here, the consequences for ignoring Jesus’ message are all the more dire for those who harden their hearts and do not repent.

2. Hornik observes that the sculpture not only incorporated the well-known *contrapposto* stance (one weight-bearing leg straight and the other slightly bent) from the fifth-century B.C. artist Polykleitos, but that *The Good Shepherd* figure shares many characteristics with the pagan criophorus figure, or the ram-bearer. The large fish in *Jonah Swallowed* and *Jonah Cast Up* is the Greek Ketos, a sea monster that is part animal and part fish. Jonah’s posture in *Jonah Under the Gourd Vine* resembles river gods from Greek and Roman mythology and evokes the Greek myth of the shepherd Endymion. In this piece the sculptor substitutes a creeping gourd, which, in Roman art, symbolized resurrection, for the bush that shaded the prophet Jonah from the sun’s intensity.

Brainstorm for other examples of artists incorporating non-Christian sources into their art to convey distinctively Christian messages. By borrowing from popular pagan motifs, Hornik suggests, early Christian artists preserved the integrity of the Christian message while not attracting unnecessary attention during periods of persecution. Are there other reasons for a Christian artist to incorporate non-Christian motifs?

3. The church went through an astounding metamorphosis, both of character and theology, after the Edict of Milan in 313. Emperor Constantine ended state-sponsored persecution of the church throughout the Roman Empire and bestowed legal status upon Christianity. Emperor Theodosius I (A.D. 379-395) declared Christianity the official and only religion of the Empire. During the fourth century, Hornik says, there is a dramatic transformation in artistic portrayals of Christ. Encourage members to discuss how Christians’ relation to their culture—whether they are actively persecuted, are an influential majority, or have official government support—influences their theological understanding. Discuss how this influences the visual art they create.

### Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.