

# We Believe in Jesus

LESSON  
THREE

## THE PROPHET



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# We Believe in Jesus

## Lesson Three

### The Prophet

#### INTRODUCTION

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When people face problems or have to make important decisions, they often turn to others for advice. If the issue is small or familiar, they may ask their family or neighbors what to do. But, when the issue is large and there will be long-term consequences, people often look for an expert, someone who can be trusted to give authoritative and true guidance about what should be done. Throughout the history of Scripture, God often provided this kind of fully reliable guidance through his prophets. These men and women authoritatively applied God's covenants to the situations his people faced.

This is the third lesson in our series *We Believe in Jesus*, and we have entitled it "The Prophet." In this lesson, we'll explore the ways that Jesus fulfills the office of prophet, authoritatively applying God's covenant to our lives.

As we mentioned in a prior lesson, in the Old Testament God instituted three offices through which he administered his kingdom: the offices of prophet, priest and king. And in the final stage of God's kingdom, which we commonly call the New Testament age, all three of these offices find their ultimate fulfillment in Christ. For this reason, studying the importance and function of these offices throughout history can help us understand Jesus' present administration of God's kingdom, as well as the blessings and obligations of his faithful followers.

When most people hear the word "prophet," they tend to think of someone who makes predictions about the future. And this is even true of most Christians. But while it's true that biblical prophets did sometimes foretell the future, this was not the main focus of their ministry. Most fundamentally, God's prophets were his ambassadors. Their job was to explain God's covenants, and to encourage his people to be faithful to him. And this was also the heart of Jesus' prophetic work.

In line with this understanding of what prophets did, we'll define a prophet as:

**God's covenant ambassador, who proclaims and applies God's word, especially to warn of judgment against sin, and to encourage the kind of loyal service to God that leads to his blessings.**

Our lesson will explore three topics related to Jesus in his role as prophet. First, we'll examine the Old Testament background to his prophetic office. Second, we'll explore the New Testament's teaching on the fulfillment of this office in Jesus. And third, we'll consider the modern application of Jesus' prophetic work. Let's begin with the Old Testament background to Jesus' prophetic office.

## OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

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Whenever Christians think about Jesus as our prophet, it's important to remember that he wasn't the first prophet that ever served God and his covenant. Throughout biblical history, there were hundreds of prophets of the Lord. They weren't equal to Jesus in power or authority. But their service to God foreshadowed all the ways Jesus fulfilled this kingdom office. So, if we want to understand what Jesus did as prophet, it helps to begin with the prophets that came before him.

Our discussion of the Old Testament background of Jesus' prophetic office will divide into three parts. First, we'll mention the qualifications for the office of prophet. Second, we'll look at the function of prophets. And third, we'll consider the expectations the Old Testament created for the office. Let's look first at the qualifications for the office of prophet.

### QUALIFICATIONS

As we have already suggested, Old Testament prophets were ambassadors or emissaries of God's covenants. In his covenants, God revealed himself as the great Emperor of his people, and his prophets served as the emissaries or authorized messengers of his royal court in heaven. They brought God's word to the people of Israel and to various other nations, and exhorted them to be faithful to God as their king. Of course, many of the nations surrounding Israel also had prophets of their own that resembled God's true prophets in superficial ways. But these false prophets used trickery, superstition, and demonic powers to represent their false gods.

**False prophets in biblical days, both in Israel and around in other countries, did and said and looked and behaved a whole lot like true prophets. But I think above all, the thing that comes out when you look at the Bible in books like Kings and Chronicles and other prophetic books is the fact that Old Testament prophets will distinguish themselves as true prophets from others because they speak in the name of the Lord himself. And as they speak in the name of the Lord himself, they do not violate what God has said in his Word. They do not violate what other true prophets have said, and they distinguish themselves that way. I think that another factor that's very important, however, is that prophets in the Old Testament were usually people who stood against popular beliefs, and unfortunately, especially in northern Israel, there was a period of time when the prophets were on the payroll. When Amos says in Amos chapter 7, "I'm neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet," what he's telling the high priest there in the northern kingdom is that he's actually not on the payroll of the king or the high priest. "I'm not a prophet," meaning a professional prophet, "nor am I the son of a prophet," meaning "nor am I in a school of prophecy. And so you**

**can't tell me what to do." And the reason Amos says this is because the high priest tells him, "Go home and stop bothering us up here in the north; go back south." And Amos says, "I can't do it because God has commanded me to do it." And we find very often that prophets like Jeremiah, Micah, and others actually encounter these false prophets who are on the payrolls of the kings. If there's one thing that we can say sociologically about prophets, it's this: they are not on the payroll of kings. They are not on the payroll of the priest. They stand for God as a witness against the abuses, and the crimes, and the evil primarily that are being inflicted by people like kings and priests.**

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

In a world where there were many false prophets, it was very important for Israelites to be able to distinguish true prophets of God from false prophets. For this reason, the Old Testament laid out several qualifications for true prophets of God.

These requirements are mentioned in Deuteronomy 18:17-22, where Moses wrote these words:

**The Lord said ... "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him... But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death." ... If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken (Deuteronomy 18:17-22).**

In this passage, we can see at least four qualifications for true prophets of God. As Moses taught here, true prophets were called by God. They were given God's word to speak to the people. They demonstrated their loyalty to God by speaking in his name only in accordance with his commands. And their ministry was authenticated by the fulfillment of their message.

Our exploration of the qualifications of Old Testament prophets will focus on each of the four requirements that Moses' mentioned: First, true prophets had to be called by God. Second, they had to be given God's word to speak. Third, they had to be loyal to God by speaking only according to his command. And fourth, their ministry had to be authenticated by the fulfillment of their message. We'll look at each of these criteria in more detail, beginning with the fact that true prophets were called by God.

## **Called by God**

In the Old Testament, God called many people to serve him as prophets. This call was not an invitation; it was a divine summons. God, the divine king, commanded one of his citizens to serve as his ambassador. We see this divine summons every time the Old Testament records the call of a prophet.

For instance, consider the call of the prophet Ezekiel in Ezekiel 2:1-2:

**He said to me, “Son of man, stand up on your feet and I will speak to you.” As he spoke, the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet, and I heard him speaking to me (Ezekiel 2:1-2).**

Here, we see that when God commanded Ezekiel to stand and hear the commission, he also sent his Spirit to ensure that Ezekiel complied. The calling of a prophet was an exercise of God’s authoritative choice as the heavenly king of his people.

God frequently issued these prophetic calls directly to the prophet — often audibly. God directly called Samuel in 1 Samuel 3, Isaiah in Isaiah 6, Amos in Amos 7, and Jeremiah in Jeremiah 1.

But at other times, God commissioned prophets indirectly, by instructing one prophet to call another. For instance, in 1 Kings 19:16, God commanded the prophet Elijah to commission his successor Elisha. This delegated calling also sheds light on the company of the prophets or the sons of the prophets seen in places like 1 Kings 20, and 2 Kings 2, which were groups of prophets centered around an established divinely called prophet. But whether the call came directly to the prophet from God, or through an authorized servant of God, the prophet’s call ultimately came at the initiative of the Lord. Without this supernatural call, no one could become a prophet, regardless of his or her good intentions, devotion to God, or knowledge of God’s word.

Besides being called by God, Old Testament prophets also had to be given God’s word to speak.

## **Given God’s Word**

The Holy Spirit inspired prophets to speak whatever God commanded them. True prophets could do nothing else when they prophesied. But when we compare the ways different prophets in Scripture spoke, we can see that divine inspiration did not mean that prophets had no control over their words. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit utilized the prophets’ personalities and perspectives as he infallibly presented his prophetic message through them. In this regard, the inspiration of prophecy was identical to the inspiration of all other Scripture.

Listen to the way Peter spoke of the Holy Spirit’s inspiration of prophets in 2 Peter 1:20-21:

**No prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20-21).**

As we see here, the Holy Spirit superintended the words of true prophets in the Old Testament. And this guaranteed that their words were authoritative and infallible.

**The Holy Spirit worked through the personality and the perspective of the particular prophet that he was dealing with. I guess that the traditional framework for understanding that theologically is “organic inspiration,” that God works through his servants, through his prophets, and uses their personality, uses their particular point of view, uses their education and the lack thereof for his purposes. I guess one could also think about using the doctrine of sanctification and understanding how God takes things that are human, earthly and physical, and sanctifies them for his own purposes to use them for his own means, and he does that with the prophets as well. With that said, though, I think there are instances within the prophetic literature where you’ll see God actually dictating to the prophets, you know, “You need to go and say this to the people,” and Isaiah or Jeremiah or Ezekiel, they go and they say it. So, there is, there are points within the prophetic literature where God will dictate to his prophets, but at the same time, God uses who they were, and didn’t override their personalities in bringing forth his prophetic work for both Israel, ancient Israel, and the church.**

— Dr. Mark Gignilliat

The third qualification of Old Testament prophets was that they had to be loyal to God by conforming their prophecies to his Law.

## **Loyal to God**

Although prophets did not simply take dictation from God, the Holy Spirit did not give them complete freedom to say whatever they pleased. Not only did they have to convey what God commanded them to speak, but they also had to ensure that their prophecies agreed with God’s existing revelation, especially as it was recorded in Scripture.

Listen to Moses’ words in Deuteronomy 13:1-4:

**If a prophet ... announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, “Let us follow other gods ... and let us worship them,” you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer... It is the Lord your God you must follow, and him you must revere. Keep his commands and obey him; serve him and hold fast to him (Deuteronomy 13:1-4).**

Moses taught something very important here: Even if a prophet could work miracles and foretell the future, he was to be rejected if his instructions violated God’s commandments.

We see this same emphasis in Lamentations 2:13-14, where Jeremiah grieved over the fact that false prophets in Israel had led the nation astray. Jeremiah said that



these prophets had “failed to expose ... sin,” that is, they had approved of the people's violation of God's law. Rather than holding the people accountable to God's covenant, they had encouraged disobedience. And in this way, they had demonstrated that they were false prophets.

Finally, the fourth qualification of Old Testament prophets was that their prophecies had to be authenticated by fulfillment. That is to say, their predictions had to come true.

### **Authenticated by Fulfillment**

Listen to Moses' words in Deuteronomy 18:22:

**If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him (Deuteronomy 18:22).**

All the words of God's prophets could be depended on because they accurately relayed the words of God, whose character and covenant promises are utterly trustworthy. True prophecies are unfailing because God has both the power and the right to bring them to pass in whatever way he intends, and because he is committed to keeping his word.

Sometimes, prophecies were authenticated by relatively quick fulfillment. For instance, in 1 Kings 17:1, the prophet Elijah declared that there would be no rain or dew until he gave the word. And as we learn in 1 Kings 18, it remained dry for three years before God finally ended the drought. And in 2 Kings 7:17-20, we see an immediate fulfillment of Elisha's prophecy that the king's officer would die.

At other times, prophetic fulfillments were not so immediate. For example, around the year 930 B.C. a true prophet predicted the birth of Josiah, who would be a faithful heir to David's house. This prophecy is recorded in 1 Kings 13:2. But the predicted child Josiah wasn't born until about 630 B.C. — almost 300 years after the prophecy — as we read in 2 Kings 22:1. And the prophecies about Jesus' birth took even longer to fulfill.

Now, at this point we should pause to mention that sometimes even the words of true prophets did not come to pass precisely as they stated them. But in light of Moses teaching, how could this happen? In order to answer this question, it's important to realize that when we read Old Testament prophecy, we sometimes get the wrong impression of their predictions. Although many people think that the prophets predicted the future precisely as it would unfold, in reality, this was not always the case.

For the most part, prophets warned of the curses that would come if people persisted in sin, and they offered the blessings that would come if people acted faithfully. The goal of these prophecies was to motivate the people to repent of their sin and to persevere in faithfulness to God and his covenant. Only when true prophets indicated that God had sworn to do something were their predictions absolute.

As a result, one legitimate way for prophecy to be fulfilled was for the people to change their behavior and thereby affect the outcome of the prophecies. In these cases,

the prophecies were actually fulfilled properly, even though their warnings or offers did not come to pass as stated.

There are many examples of this in Scripture, but the basic principle is described in Jeremiah 18:7-10, where we read these words:

**If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it (Jeremiah 18:7-10).**

So, 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 flipside 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. Rob Lister

In one way or another, the words of true prophets are always fulfilled. Sometimes they come to pass as stated. At other times, human beings respond to prophecies and thereby bring about a different result. But in all cases, the outcomes of true prophecy are consistent with God's covenant and character, and authenticate the ministry of his true prophets.

Moses described the qualifications of the prophetic office as a way for God's people to recognize which prophets truly spoke for God. He did this because he wanted them to discern and obey the messages of true prophets, and to live in fidelity to God's covenant. And it's important for us to keep these qualifications in mind, too, because they were the same qualifications that Jesus met when he served as God's prophet in the New Testament age.

Now that we've looked at the qualifications of prophets, we're ready to consider the function of their office.

## FUNCTION

We'll mention three aspects of the function of prophets. First, we'll speak of their authority. Second, we'll mention their task. And third, we'll touch on the methods they used to carry out this task. Let's look first at their authority.

### Authority

As we mentioned at the beginning of this lesson, a prophet is:

**God's covenant ambassador, who proclaims and applies God's word, especially to warn of judgment against sin, and to encourage the kind of loyal service to God that leads to his blessings.**

In the Old Testament, God was presented as the great king who ruled over his people through covenants. And his prophets were ambassadors of these covenants who explained what God had revealed to them in his heavenly court.

In the ancient Near East, powerful emperors or "suzerains" often ruled over smaller nations or "vassals" at a distance from their capital. These suzerains typically imposed a treaty on vassals that spelled out the terms of their relationship. Normally, the Bible refers to this kind of treaty as a covenant.

To administer and enforce these covenants, suzerains employed ambassadors that spoke in their name and wielded their delegated authority. It was the ambassador's job to remind vassal nations of the terms of the treaty, to warn them of the curses that would come if they were unfaithful to the terms of the treaty, and to encourage the vassals to obey these terms in order to obtain the blessings of the treaty.

Knowing this ancient Near-Eastern history is important because in the Old Testament, God often described his relationship to his people in terms of a suzerain-vassal covenant. And as the suzerain, he appointed prophets to be the authoritative ambassadors that reminded his vassal people of the terms of his covenant.

Because the prophets were God's ambassadors, their words were to be received as if God had spoken them himself. The Holy Spirit also inspired the prophets so that they would correctly proclaim God's thoughts and intentions in response to the people of Israel. In this way, God ensured that all his prophets would always speak authoritatively and truly when they represented him.

**Why do we take the words of true prophets seriously? Because true prophets speak for God, as his agents. Therefore, if we do not take their words seriously, we are uncircumcised in heart and ears, as the Bible describes it. This means that our hearts have not been changed yet. We, in fact, are rebelling against God. Thus, if we refuse to listen to the words of the prophets, we refuse to listen to the Word of God. And we are rebelling against God himself. Thus, it is a very serious issue.**

— Dr. Peter Chow, translation

With this understanding of prophetic authority in mind, let's turn to the task God assigned to his prophets.

## Task

To understand the task of the prophets, let's take another look at ancient Near-Eastern suzerain-vassal treaties. When suzerains imposed covenants on vassal states in the ancient Near East, these covenants spelled out the details of the arrangement between them. They listed: the suzerain's benevolence in the past, that is, the good things the suzerain had already done for the vassal; the loyalty that the vassal was required to render to the suzerain, including many rules or stipulations the vassal was required to follow; and the consequences that would result according to the vassal's obedience or disobedience to the terms of the treaty, namely, blessings for the vassal if the vassal obeyed the terms, and punishments or curses if the vassal disobeyed.

And very similar dynamics were true of God's relationship with his covenant people. So, as God's covenant ambassadors, prophets were assigned the task of reminding God's people of the details of his covenant, and of using threats of judgment and offers of blessing to encourage them to obey its terms.

When Israel was in good standing before God, the prophets reminded them of the consequences of their actions to encourage them to persevere in faithfulness. For instance, we see examples of this in Jeremiah 7:5-7, 21:12, and 22:4-5.

But when Israel was not in good standing before God because of serious or prolonged disobedience to the terms of the covenant, the prophets charged them with rebellion and disloyalty. They described Israel's sins and reminded the people of the covenant curses in order to drive them to repentance. We see examples of this in Jeremiah 8 and Amos 4:1-3. And in many cases, the prophets even offered Israel blessings if the nation complied with the demand for repentance. We find this type of prophecy in Joel 2:12-27, and many other places.

Now that we have looked at the authority and task of biblical prophets, we should briefly mention the methods they used to accomplish their job.

## Methods

Without a doubt, the most common method the prophets used to accomplish their task was speaking. Prophets performed their job primarily by proclaiming God's words to his people. They accused people of sin, commanded them to obey, encouraged them to persevere, warned them of judgment, and offered them blessings. They told parables. They foretold the future. They prayed. And they even interceded for God's people. We see this hundreds of times in Scripture. Moreover, many prophets also wrote down their words, which is why we find so many prophetic books and other writings in the Bible.

But the prophets also used other methods that relied more on special actions than on verbal communication. For instance, the Holy Spirit gave some prophets power to perform prophetic signs and wonders. These miraculous works of power testified to the

prophets' legitimacy as God's ambassadors, and demonstrated God's intention to back up the warnings and offers that the prophets proclaimed.

As one example, the prophet Moses announced the Lord's will to both the Israelites and the Egyptians, and his words were attended by countless miracles and signs, such as the ten plagues upon Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, and many other miracles recorded in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. These works of the Holy Spirit's power testified that Moses was a true prophet, and warned both the Egyptians and the Israelites to obey him.

The ministries of the prophets Elijah and Elisha also included many miraculous events, as we see in 1 Kings 17 through 2 Kings 13. The prophet Samuel also performed miracles, such as calling thunder and rain in 1 Samuel 12. And an unnamed prophet in 1 Kings 13 gave a miraculous sign by withering king Jeroboam's hand.

In addition to miracles, many prophets also performed symbolic actions that confirmed their verbal messages. And they even engaged in spiritual encounters as they urged God's people to obey the terms of his covenant.

Seeing the prophets as God's covenant emissaries helps us understand that the Bible's threats of curses and offers of blessings are all grounded in the covenant relationship between God and his people. God is not capricious in his dealings with his people; he does not act in wildly unpredictable ways. Instead, he seeks to enforce the terms of his covenant — and these terms are no secret. He graciously gives us his law, and he sent ambassadors to show us how to apply it to our changing circumstances. God makes it easy for his people to know what he requires because he wants us to walk before him in faithfulness, to experience his blessings, and to accomplish his goals for his kingdom.

Now that we've looked at the qualifications and functions of the office of prophet, let's turn our attention to the expectations the Old Testament created for future prophetic ministries.

## EXPECTATIONS

Old Testament expectations for the future of the office of prophet were of two basic types. On the one hand, some expectations were created by the nature of the historical development of the office. On the other hand, other expectations were created by specific prophecies regarding future prophets. We'll look at both types of expectations, beginning with those based on the historical development of the office of prophet.

### Historical Development

Because God's relationship with humanity has always been governed by his covenants, there has always been a role for prophets to remind people of the terms of those covenants. But throughout history, this role has occasionally changed. As God's

kingdom shifted and grew throughout history, the role of prophets adjusted to meet its changing needs.

We'll consider the role of prophets during four different stages of history, beginning with the long period of history before Israel had a king, which we'll call the pre-monarchy.

***Pre-Monarchy.*** This is the period of time that corresponds to God's covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham and Moses. In the beginning of the pre-monarchical period, God's kingdom had not been set apart from the rest of the world in a particular nation. And even when the nation was set apart in the days of Abraham, it still had no king. At this point in time, prophets performed a variety of tasks and were called by a number of descriptive titles. In general, we can say that they spoke with God, received visions, and held humanity accountable to God's covenants.

For instance, when God first created the world, he spoke directly with Adam and Eve; they received his revelation by walking and talking with God, as we read in Genesis 2–3. They fulfilled their prophetic role by teaching their children about God and his covenant. And some of their descendants also had similar relationships with God, such as Enoch who is mentioned in Genesis 5:24.

In the days of Noah, God spoke directly with Noah as well, as we read in Genesis 6–9. But he also called Noah to prophesy covenant judgment against the world because it had sinned so greatly against him, as Peter taught in 2 Peter 2:5. Beyond this, Noah performed the very public prophetic action of building the ark and filling it with animals to confirm his message.

God also spoke directly to Abraham, and revealed to him his plans for the future. Through his talks with God and his communication of those talks to other people, Abraham also served a prophetic role, which is mentioned in places like Genesis 20:7. Abraham's descendants Isaac, Jacob and Joseph also served as God's prophets. They received dreams and visions from God, and also angelic visitations. Each of these prophets held the people accountable to God's covenant by proclaiming his word to them, and by exhorting them to be faithful to the Lord.

In the days of Moses, we find another significant period of pre-monarchical prophetic activity. According to Numbers 12:6, Moses himself was God's preeminent prophet at this time. At this point in history, God gave his people a written covenant in the form of the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant in Exodus 20–23. And it became Moses' responsibility to administer this covenant by explaining it to the people, governing them according to its terms, and exhorting them to be faithful to God in order to receive the covenant blessings rather than the covenant curses. Other prophets contemporary with Moses and after him continued to perform these functions, though none with the scope and influence of Moses' ministry.

While the office of prophet had been extremely broad during the pre-monarchy, it became clearly formalized in the days of the monarchy, when the nation of Israel had settled the Promised Land and was living under the rule of a king.

***Monarchy.*** The monarchical period began with Saul, Israel's first king. But it's most closely associated with Saul's successor David and his descendants.

During the monarchical period, the office of prophet became focused on the central arenas of power, especially the king's court and the city of Jerusalem, and the number of prophets increased. With the king as the focal point of God's vassal people, the prophets' work of reminding people of the terms of God's covenant was commonly accomplished by direct contact with the king.

During this period, the primary role of prophets was to remind the kings and their courts of the nation's duty to serve God faithfully. For instance, the books of 1 and 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles record many interactions between the prophets and the kings of Israel and Judah. Even so, the prophets also continued to speak to the people in general, reminding them of the Lord's covenant requirements and of the consequences of their behavior. The prophets also commanded the neighboring nations to live in peace with Israel and Judah.

**The reason that the Bible mentions Israel and Judah as two different kingdoms... Of course, they were one kingdom initially, but then the kingdom divided under Solomon's son Rehoboam — that was around 920 B.C. or something like that — and the northern kingdom had ten tribes; the southern had two. The northern kingdom was called Israel. The largest tribe there was Ephraim, but that whole ten got to be called Israel. And the Southern was called Judah, the largest tribe there, and the capital of the southern was, of course, Jerusalem.**

— Dr. Frank Barker

**After the Solomonic era, there was a split between the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom. The northern kingdom was referred to as Israel, and they had their own central place of worship as well. And then the southern kingdom was referred to as Judah. And after the split of the kingdoms you'll often see prophets who go to different places, like they'll be, Hosea was a prophet to Israel, and you'll have Isaiah who's a prophet to Judah. And so there's respective realms of ministry that are related to these split kingdoms of the north and the south.**

— Dr. Mark Gignilliat

Sadly, the kings and people of Israel and Judah did not obey the prophets. And as a result, they were eventually subjected to the covenant curse of exile from the Promised Land.

***Exile.*** The northern kingdom of Israel was exiled in 723 or 722 B.C. and taken into captivity in Assyria. The southern kingdom of Judah was exiled in 587 or 586 B.C. and taken into captivity in Babylon.

The office of prophet continued to be oriented toward the kings of God's people, even during the exile. But at this stage of history, there was no king, so the emphasis was on restoring the king and the kingdom to God's people.

To reach this goal, the prophets encouraged God's people to repent of their sin, and to return to covenant faithfulness, so that God would grant them his covenant blessings. The prophets also proclaimed that if the people returned to God, he would strengthen them to keep his covenant so that they wouldn't fall under his covenant curses again. As we read in Jeremiah 31:33-34, the Lord would even make it impossible for them to break the covenant ever again, so that they would live by his law with enthusiasm. Through this ministry, the prophets hoped to persuade God to restore their kingdom in the Promised Land under the kingship of a righteous descendant of David.

Eventually, the period of exile came to a partial end during a period of restoration.

**Restoration.** This post-exilic or restoration era began around 539 or 538 B.C. There was still no king in Israel or Judah at this time, but Jerusalem and the temple were eventually rebuilt, and many families returned to live in the Promised Land.

There were still relatively few prophets at this time. But some faithful prophets, like Haggai and Zechariah, kept watch on the leaders and the general population in order to encourage them to be faithful to God. They exhorted the nation to be faithful during the restoration attempt so that God would see it through to completion. Unfortunately, the people did not heed the prophetic warnings, and the restoration efforts faltered.

During the period of restoration, the expectations for the kingdom were that God would eventually fulfill his promises to David by returning one of his heirs to the throne of Israel and Judah. We see this hope expressed in places like Zechariah 12–13. In the beginning, the hope was that the obedience of the people would move God to bless them. But as the restoration faltered, the hope became that God would eventually have compassion on his people despite their sin, and restore the kingdom for his own name's sake.

By tracing the historical development of the office of prophet, we can see that the prophets were always God's authoritative ambassadors who were tasked with the job of holding God's people accountable to his covenant. And this consistency created a particular expectation for future prophetic ministries. Specifically, it indicated that all God's future prophets would also be his authoritative emissaries, whose job it would be to remind his people of his benevolence toward them, of the loyalty he required of them, and of the consequences of blessings and curses.

But there were also expectations created by the ways the office of prophet changed over time. In the beginning, God's prophets were not closely associated with the office of king. But once Israel had a king, we see that the role of prophets was closely tied to the royal office, and that each time substantial changes affected the office of king, there were repercussions in the office of prophet.

So, this indicates that the expectations for the office of prophet in the New Testament period were to be drawn primarily from the last stage of Old Testament history, namely the post-exilic restoration, when God's people were still waiting for a Davidic king to return to the throne. In particular, the expectation was that the future prophets would herald and accompany the messianic king, ushering in a new age of fidelity to God's covenant.



Besides the Old Testament expectations for future prophets that were based on the historical development of the office, there were also expectations created by specific prophecies regarding future prophets.

## Specific Prophecies

There are too many Old Testament prophecies regarding future prophets for us to mention them all. So for our purposes in this lesson, we'll limit our discussion to just three. The first one we'll mention is the hope that God would eventually fulfill the exilic prophecy that a special prophet would be a herald of the Lord himself.

According to Isaiah 40:3-5, a special prophet would announce that the Lord was coming to conquer all his enemies and to restore the Davidic monarchy. And once this herald appeared, restoration would be imminent.

Second, the people also still awaited the final prophet like Moses, who would rise up to lead the people in righteousness, just as Moses had done in the pre-monarchical period. Recall the Lord's words to Moses in Deuteronomy 18:18:

**I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him (Deuteronomy 18:18).**

**In the Old Testament, we have anticipation of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in terms of his work, in terms of prophet, priest and king. Deuteronomy 18 is a very, very important passage which speaks of a prophet in the future to come, like a Moses. In the Old Testament context, like a Moses was one who, like Moses, met God face to face, who uniquely received God's revelation. In fact, Moses stood as sort of the pinnacle of all the prophets. As you work through the Old Testament, particularly even at the end of Deuteronomy 34, there is the announcement there that no prophet like Moses has yet arisen. And this sets us up for one to come who will be like a Moses, yet greater, who will speak God's word, who will give us God's truth, who will know God face to face, and that really is culminated in our Lord Jesus Christ. John 1 picks this up, our Lord who knew the Father from all eternity, who discloses him. Acts 3 picks this up as well that this is the fulfillment of this, so that Jesus is the one who brings God's kingdom; he brings God's revelation to pass. He is the one who fulfills Moses' role yet in a greater way. And Hebrews 1 particularly emphasizes that that God speaking through the prophets, including Moses, is now culminated in Jesus Christ his Son who brings that revelation to pass.**

— Dr. Stephen Wellum

On some level, God's people always expected their Lord to send this prophet like Moses. Sadly, no Old Testament prophet was able to demonstrate the same powerful spiritual gifts that Moses possessed, or to bring about the full blessings of God's covenant. But in the days of the restoration, there was renewed hope that God was finally about to send this prophet to restore the kingdom.

Third, there was an expectation that when the kingdom was fully restored in the future, there would also be a restoration of prophecy. False prophets would be purged from the land, and the number of true prophets would increase.

As the restoration prophet Zechariah wrote in 13:2 of his book:

**“On that day, I will banish the names of the idols from the land, and they will be remembered no more,” declares the Lord Almighty. “I will remove both the prophets and the spirit of impurity from the land” (Zechariah 13:2).**

Moreover, the people were still expecting the fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel regarding the multiplication of true prophets of God that would attend God's full covenant blessings. Listen to what Joel prophesied in Joel 2:28-29:

**And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days (Joel 2:28-29).**

These future days, which Joel also referenced by the term “afterward,” were the end times, the last days, when God would fully establish his kingdom over the whole earth and pour out his ultimate blessings on his people. It was expected that at that time, prophecy would be extremely common among God's faithful people, as they all promoted God's covenant, and encouraged each other to worship him.

The Old Testament closes with Israel in disarray and with little hope for the immediate success of the kingdom. Even so, the faithful in Israel maintained confidence that God would eventually fulfill all the Old Testament expectations for his kingdom, and that he would accomplish this in part through the office of prophet. And as we'll see, this is exactly what happened in the ministry of Jesus.

Having investigated the Old Testament background to the responsibilities and ministry that God gave to his prophets, we're ready to turn to our second main topic: the fulfillment of the prophetic office in the person of Jesus.

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## **FULFILLMENT IN JESUS**

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The New Testament makes it clear that Jesus is God's ultimate prophet. He is perfectly qualified to serve as God's authoritative covenant ambassador. He perfectly executes the functions of the office. And in him, all the Old Testament prophetic expectations are fulfilled.

Our discussion of Jesus' fulfillment of the prophetic office will focus on the same categories we used to describe the Old Testament prophets and their work, specifically: the qualifications, function, and expectations for the office. Let's turn first to the way Jesus met the qualifications of a prophet.

## QUALIFICATIONS

As we saw earlier, true prophets in Israel had to meet four qualifications: They had to be called by God. They were given God's word to speak to the people. They were required to be loyal to God by speaking only what he had commanded. And their messages had to be authenticated by their fulfillment. And as we'll see, Jesus met each of these qualifications. First, Jesus was called by God.

### Called by God

Jesus was specifically called by God to be his prophet. We can see this quite clearly in the events surrounding his birth, baptism, and transfiguration.

To begin with, listen to the prophet Simeon's words at Jesus' birth in Luke 2:30-35:

**My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel... This child is destined ... to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed (Luke 2:30-35).**

Simeon revealed that from the time of Jesus' birth, our Lord was called to be a prophetic revelation and sign to his people.

Beyond this, at Jesus baptism God the Father and the Holy Spirit both showed that Jesus had been called as a prophet. In Matthew 3-4, Mark 1, and Luke 3-4, God the Father spoke audibly and the Holy Spirit appeared as a dove to show that Jesus was the Son of God who had been appointed to a special ministry. In all these chapters, Jesus' baptism sets him apart for his public ministry of proclaiming the prophetic message of repentance and the coming of the kingdom of God.

But perhaps the action that most clearly identified Jesus as a prophet was his transfiguration, which is described this way in Matthew 17:2-3:

**[Jesus'] face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light... Moses and Elijah [were] talking with Jesus (Matthew 17:2-3).**

Jesus appeared with the greatest prophets of the Old Testament: Moses, the law-giver and standard for those who would speak God's word to his people; and Elijah, the miracle-worker whose preaching called the faithless house of David to repentance. Just by his presence with these two men, Jesus was shown to be a great prophet.

But notice what happened next in Matthew 17:4-5:

**Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters.” While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” (Matthew 17:4-5).**

God commanded Peter and the other disciples to listen not to all three prophets, but simply to Jesus. They were to heed him above Moses and Elijah. In this way, God himself demonstrated that Jesus was the foremost prophet of all time.

**It’s interesting in the narrative of the transfiguration that God commands or urges the disciples to listen to Jesus. I think it’s important to recognize that he did not instruct them to abandon Moses or Elijah, but to give primacy to Jesus. The whole point, I think, of that moment was to establish the fact that Jesus Christ is the zenith of the revelation of God. The tradition of the Jews was to recognize and respect Moses as the embodiment of the Law, and Elijah as one of the most famous of the prophets. It’s not that the Law is obsolete, or the prophets are obsolete. Certainly, we would not want to abandon our Old Testament. But it is the quintessential and supreme and superior nature of the revelation in Jesus Christ that is being underscored here. It’s rather like the first chapter of the epistle to the Hebrews where God has spoken to us in many times and in different ways through his prophets, but now, now we come to the purest and fullest. It’s not God sending a messenger but God himself amongst us. That’s, I think, the underlying subtext of the transfiguration command.**

— Dr. Glen Scorgie

For the second qualification, Jesus specifically stated that he had been given God’s word to speak.

### **Given God’s Word**

Take, for example, Jesus words recorded in John 14:24:

**These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me (John 14:24).**

Jesus made similar statements in places like John 12:49 and 14:10. In fact, in John chapter 1 Jesus is actually referred to as God’s Word.

The word “Word” used in John 1, the Greek word “*logos*” has been discussed much by theologians down the years, and it certainly may well be true that there could be some Greek understanding to the idea of God as reason, or God is wisdom, but clearly the idea of the word of the Lord, the word of God is a very dominant theme in the Old Testament, and John may well be picking up illusions that we used in Greek philosophy, but actually also applying it to Jesus as God’s Word, the revealer of God, the God who said, “Let there be light” spoke and it happened, and maybe John is just saying that when the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, he came so with all the authority and communicative power that God has exercised throughout all of the Old Testament too.

— Dr. Simon Vibert

First of all, we can see the Word of God as a person, the Lord Jesus Christ, and then secondly as speech of God. But John addresses him as the “Word of God.” And what he primarily does in that regard is basically communicating to us our Lord’s role in making known, the Father to us. And the Hebrew writer would say that no one has seen the Lord at any time, but Jesus Christ who was in the bosom, you know, obviously came forth and has made him known unto us.

— Dr. Larry Cockrell

John, if he’s doing anything evangelistic, it is just driving to the same point that this is God, you have to deal with it. And that is reaching to John 20:28, where John wants us to have seen Jesus as God, speaking God’s word to us. We can trust it because he is the Word of God.

— Dr. John McKinley

Third, Jesus fulfilled the prophetic qualification of being loyal to God.

## Loyal to God

Throughout his ministry, Jesus continually insisted that he was carrying out the Father’s will. He spoke and did only those things that the Father commanded. We see this in many places, such as John 5:19, 30, and 8:28.

Jesus also made it clear that all his words and works were consistent with those of the prophets that had come before him. For instance, he spoke approvingly of the ministry of John the Baptist in Matthew 11:9-14. He affirmed the prophet Jonah in Matthew 12:38-45. He inaugurated his own ministry in Luke 4 by claiming to fulfill

Isaiah 61 and the promised arrival of an anointed prophet. In fact, Jesus repeatedly and constantly affirmed the truth and abiding validity of the entire Old Testament Scripture. As he said in Matthew 5:17:

**Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17).**

In these and other ways, Jesus showed that everything he said and did was a demonstration of total loyalty to God.

Finally, Jesus also met the qualification of having his prophetic messages authenticated by their fulfillment.

### **Authenticated by Fulfillment**

The Gospels often prove Jesus' status as an authentic prophet by pointing out that his prophecies were fulfilled. Sometimes his words came true immediately, like when he successfully controlled nature, performed exorcisms, healed the sick, and raised the dead. In these cases, things like the weather, demons, illness, and even death itself immediately obeyed his authoritative, prophetic commands. At other times, his prophecies were fulfilled later, as when he predicted the future.

For instance, in John 18:9, John provided this comment:

**This happened so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled: "I have not lost one of those you gave me" (John 18:9).**

Here, John referred to something Jesus had said in his high priestly prayer in John 17:12, and he indicated that Jesus' words had been fulfilled.

And of course, the words Jesus spoke about his own impending death and resurrection were also fulfilled, as we see in places like Matthew 16:21 and 20:18-19, and John 18:32. Through fulfillments like these, Jesus was shown to be a true prophet of God.

But not all of Jesus' prophecies were fulfilled in his lifetime. Many of them had to do with the future, and often with the distant future. In some cases, the fulfillment of these prophecies is recorded elsewhere in history.

For example, listen to the prophecy Jesus gave in Luke 21:5-6:

**Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God. But Jesus said, "As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down" (Luke 21:5-6).**

Jesus said that the Jewish temple would be destroyed because the Jews refused to repent of their sin. But the temple was still standing when Jesus died. It was destroyed shortly afterwards, though, when the Romans sacked Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

Obviously, not all of Jesus' prophecies have been fulfilled. For instance, he still hasn't returned to consummate the kingdom of God. But he will. In fact, we can and should be utterly confident that Jesus will eventually fulfill all his promises. Because in every case where we can evaluate his prophecies against Scripture and the rest of history, his words have always been authenticated by their fulfillment. And since his words have always come true in the past, we should expect them to come true in the future, too.

**I think the confidence that we have is that if we go back into Old Testament history we can see how God has fulfilled his promises in the first coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Step by step through all the way from his initial promise in Genesis 3:15 through the prophetic revelation we have, God has been anticipating the coming of his son, the Messiah. All of that took place. All of that was fulfilled now 2,000 years ago. And when Jesus then says, in light of his coming and his finished work, that he will return, that this will happen, we can be sure in light of God's keeping his promises in the past that he will continue to do so in the future.**

— Dr. Stephen Wellum

Having seen that Jesus met the qualifications of the prophetic office, we're ready to look at his fulfillment of the function of that office.

## FUNCTION

As we've said throughout this lesson, prophets were God's covenant ambassadors. They explained his will to his people, exhorting them to repent from their rebellion, and encouraging them to serve God loyally. In particular, we looked at three aspects of their function: their authority, their task, and their methods.

At this point in our lesson, we'll describe Jesus' function as a prophet in ways that parallel the function of Old Testament prophets. First, we'll see that Jesus also had authority to speak for God. Second, we'll see that his task was similar to that of Old Testament prophets. And third, we'll show that his methods were similar to theirs. Let's look first at Jesus' authority to represent God.

### Authority

The New Testament makes it abundantly clear that Jesus had authority to speak on behalf of his Father. We see this in passages like John 7:16-19, 12:49-50, and 14:24. In these passages, Jesus spoke with an authority that had been delegated to him by God the Father.

As Jesus told the crowds in Jerusalem in John 7:16-19:

**My teaching is not my own. It comes from him who sent me... He who speaks on his own does so to gain honor for himself, but he who works for the honor of the one who sent him is a man of truth; there is nothing false about him (John 7:16-19).**

Jesus' authority from the Father is also evident in his teaching that whoever received him also received the Father, and whoever rejected him also rejected the Father. This is clear in many, many passages, such as Matthew 10:40, Mark 9:37, Luke 9:48, and John 13:20, and 12:44. As just one example, listen to Jesus' words in Luke 10:16:

**He who rejects me rejects him who sent me (Luke 10:16).**

Those who turn away from the person and message of God's authoritative messenger will eventually recognize the authenticity of the message. But sadly, by that time they may have lost their opportunity to respond.

Listen to this account of Jesus' confrontation with his opponents in John 8:26-28:

**"I have much to say in judgment of you. But he who sent me is reliable, and what I have heard from him I tell the world." They did not understand that he was telling them about his Father. So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am the one I claim to be and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me" (John 8:26-28).**

With this understanding of Jesus' prophetic authority in mind, we're in a position to look at the task Jesus was sent to accomplish.

## **Task**

As we noted earlier, because the prophets were God's covenant ambassadors, they were assigned the task of reminding God's people of the details of his covenant, and encouraging them to obey its terms. And in his role as prophet, this was also the task assigned to Jesus. We see this especially in the way Jesus announced the good news that the final stages of God's kingdom were coming.

First, in all his teachings about the kingdom of God, he proclaimed the truth of God's kingship and authority, and thereby affirmed the existence of God's covenant with his people. We see this in many places, including the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:10, where Jesus taught his disciples to pray for God's kingdom to come to earth, and for his will to be done.

Second, Jesus also confirmed that the terms of the covenant were still in force, and that the people had failed to obey them. This is clear from his exhortations that the people repent of their sins, such as Matthew 4:17, and Mark 1:15.

And third, Jesus affirmed the consequences of the covenant. For instance, in the seven woes of Matthew 23, Jesus exhorted God's people to obey God in order to avoid his judgment. And in the Beatitudes that begin the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:3-



12, he encouraged God's people to petition God for mercy, in order to receive his blessings.

Listen to the way Jesus summarized his task at the beginning of his public ministry in Luke 4:17-21:

**The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." ... [Then he said], "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:17-21).**

Here, Jesus specifically identified himself as the herald or announcer of the restoration of God's kingdom that had been prophesied in Isaiah 61.

Isaiah taught that when God came to bring final judgment against his enemies and to extend his kingdom through Israel to the entire world, he would begin this work through a special prophet. That prophet would announce the good news, or gospel, that God's kingdom was finally arriving. And in the course of that announcement, the prophet would also remind God's covenant people of their obligations — encouraging them to repent of their sin in order to avoid the covenant curses, and to persevere in faithfulness in order to receive God's covenant blessings. And according to Jesus' own testimony, our Lord himself was that prophet.

**What is the relationship between the gospel and the kingdom of God? In the Gospel of Mark 1, the first recorded words of Jesus are, "the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the gospel." The gospel is the good news proclaiming that the reign of God's kingdom has come into this world. Thus, all the miracles Jesus performed are signs of this coming kingdom. Since the rule and kingdom of God are here our sins are forgiven. The blind can see. The lame can walk. The lepers are cleansed. Demons are cast out, and the dead are raised. That is the good news. The good news of course, at its core, is the cross — the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If Jesus did not die and rise again, he would not have won salvation for us. He would not have overcome the power of death. And the kingdom of God would not have come to us. Therefore, the gospel is the best news. The coming of God's kingdom is the greatest blessing and joyfulness for the human race.**

— Dr. Peter Chow, translation

**One of the real questions in the New Testament is what is the relationship between the kingdom of God and the gospel? If we start by understanding that the kingdom of God is the rule and reign of**

**God in the hearts of men and women, and that rule and reign manifesting itself in every sphere of life in which their lives touch. The way that they come into that rule and reign is through the message of the gospel, the *euangelion*, the good news, that Christ has laid his life down upon the cross for their sins. And through that transforming power of the gospel, then they are called to transform the world around them and bring in God's work of the kingdom to every area of their life.**

— Dr. Jeff Lowman

Now that we've explored Jesus' prophetic authority and task, let's take a look at the methods he used to fulfill his ministry.

## Methods

Like the Old Testament prophets, Jesus' primary method for accomplishing his prophetic task was speaking. That is to say, he held people accountable to God's covenant mainly by proclaiming God's words to them. He accused them of sin; he commanded them to repent and to obey God's will as it was revealed in the Scriptures; he encouraged them to persevere in faithfulness; he warned them of coming judgment; and he offered blessings to those who were faithful. He told parables. He foretold the future. He prayed. And he interceded for God's people.

Interestingly, one thing that Jesus did not do was write down his teachings for us in Scripture. But, just like some Old Testament prophets, he had disciples that did this for him. The New Testament contains four gospels — Matthew, Mark, Luke and John in which Jesus' disciples recorded his spoken prophetic ministry.

And like the Old Testament prophets, Jesus also used many methods besides speaking to conduct his prophetic ministry — methods that relied more on special actions than on verbal communication. Perhaps the most obvious way this is true is his miracles. Jesus performed more miracles than any other prophet in the history of God's people. And Jesus' miraculous works of power testified to his legitimacy as God's ambassador; they demonstrated God's strong approval of everything that Jesus said.

As Jesus said in John 10:25:

**The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me (John 10:25).**

Jesus also performed symbolic actions like Old Testament prophets. For example, he received baptism from John the Baptist as a symbolic act in Matthew 3:15-17. And, like Old Testament prophets, Jesus also engaged in spiritual encounters. For instance, he triumphed over temptation by the Devil in Matthew 4:1-11, and Luke 4:1-13. And, he exorcised demons in Mark 1:25-26, and 5:13.

By looking at Jesus' prophetic authority, task and methods, we can see that he truly filled the office of prophet. And because of this, we can be assured that everything he prophesied will be fulfilled; the words of Jesus are faithful and true. And therefore we

have an obligation to listen to him and to obey them. For those of us who are in God's covenant community, our obedience to Jesus' words leads to God's covenant blessings, while our disobedience leads to his discipline. And for those who are not part of God's people, Jesus' prophetic words are both a warning of judgment against those who reject him, and an offer of life to all those who will repent of their sin and receive him by faith.

Having seen that Jesus fulfilled both the qualifications and function of the office of prophet, let's look briefly at how he fulfilled the Old Testament expectations for the future of the prophetic office.

## EXPECTATIONS

Earlier in this lesson, we said that at the end of the Old Testament, there were at least three expectations for prophets during the final stages of God's kingdom: that there would be a prophetic herald of the Lord; that there would be a final prophet like Moses; and that there would be a restoration of prophecy. And as we'll see, all these expectations came to fulfillment in the person and ministry of Jesus.

Let's look at each of these expectations in relation to Jesus, beginning with the herald of the Lord.

### Herald of the Lord

The expected prophetic herald had been prophesied in Isaiah 40:3-5, where we read these words:

**A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken" (Isaiah 40:3-5).**

The special prophet foretold here was to announce the arrival of the Lord, who would then conquer all his enemies and restore the Davidic monarchy.

And in fact, Jesus himself was both the Lord who came to defeat his enemies, and the king who was heir to David's throne. Through Jesus, God was fulfilling all the prophecies regarding the last days and the kingdom of God. But who was his herald? How was the prophecy regarding the herald of the Lord fulfilled in Jesus? It was John the Baptist, who announced the coming of Jesus.

Listen to the words of John the Baptist in the gospel of the apostle John 1:23:

**John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord'" (John 1:23).**

John the Baptist had been assigned the role of announcing the arrival of God, who would come as a warrior to conquer his enemies and bless his people. And the one whom the Baptist announced and heralded was Jesus.

Listen to this account from the Gospel of John 1:32-34:

**Then John [the Baptist] gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on [Jesus]. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God” (John 1:32-34).**

John fulfilled his prophetic mission by identifying Jesus as the Son of God who had come to bring in the kingdom of God by defeating God’s enemies and restoring the throne to David’s house.

The second Old Testament expectation for future prophecy that Jesus fulfilled was that there would be a final prophet like Moses.

## **Prophet like Moses**

In Deuteronomy 18:15, Moses spoke these words to Israel:

**The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him (Deuteronomy 18:15).**

In Acts 3:22-23, Peter explicitly taught that Jesus was the prophet like Moses whom the Old Testament had anticipated.

Jesus performed miracles on a scale that hadn’t been seen since Moses. He prophesied with greater knowledge than anyone since Moses had possessed. He knew God face to face as Moses had. And Jesus ensured that all those who responded in faith to his prophetic teaching would be counted as perfect covenant keepers, and thereby inherit the full blessings of God’s covenant kingdom.

As we read in Hebrews 3:5-6:

**Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house, testifying to what would be said in the future. But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house. And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast (Hebrews 3:5-6).**

In fact, the New Testament teaches that Jesus was not only the greatest prophet since Moses, but the greatest prophet of all time. Hebrews 1:1-2 teaches that before Jesus, God’s activity through his prophets took place over a large span of time and encompassed a variety of means and approaches. But in these days of the restoration of God’s

kingdom, God has given us even greater revelation through his son, the greatest prophet of all. As we see in John 1:18 and 14:9, Jesus is the fullest and clearest revelation of the Father's identity, will and salvation. In fact, according to John 1:14, Jesus is the very Word of God incarnate.

**The superiority of Jesus' revelation to all other prophets who came before lies in the fact that Jesus not only proclaims the word of God, but is the very incarnate Word of God. He embodies the word of God. All other prophets that came before, as remarkable as their ministry was, they were spokesmen of God's word. Jesus, when he comes, he certainly is a spokesman of God's word; he certainly preaches the kingdom of God; preaches repentance; he preaches the commands of God, but he does so in a way in which, because of the incarnation, he also embodies the identity of God.**

— Dr. Rob Lister

**So, when Jesus comes as prophet, and he comes as prophet, priest and king, fulfilling all of these roles in Israel, all of the offices are fulfilled in Christ. As a prophet he is the one that was prophesied by Moses himself, one will come "like me." He then will really put an end to all other prophesy. Because the reason that God has spoken in a final way by his Son, is because none of the other prophets were God, and none of the prophets could absorb within them the full revelation of God. But now the one comes who actually is the revealer. The one comes who knows who God is because he is God. He knows all the plans of God. He knows the holiness of God. He knows precisely what needs to be done in order to propitiate God. So he bears within him every concern that God has, everything that God is interested in, he knows because he is God. And so, the graciousness of the revelation of Christ in his person, and then in his words, as our prophet, shows us that there is no other question we need to ask than that which Christ himself has revealed because he is wise enough to know what he can reveal and what he should not reveal. And he is fully knowledgeable enough to give us absolute truth and the absolute example in all that he does. He is the perfect prophet.**

— Dr. Thomas Nettles

Jesus' significance as the fulfillment of the prophetic office cannot be overemphasized. He is the clearest, surest revelation of the Father's will and purposes, revealing both God's demands and God's promises for the restoration of his kingdom.

The third way that we see Old Testament expectations of prophecy fulfilled in Jesus has to do with the restoration of prophecy.

## Restoration of Prophecy

As we have seen, the Old Testament anticipated a day when false prophets would be eliminated and true prophets would be extremely frequent among God's people. And through Jesus, this expectation began to be realized. With regard to the multiplication of true prophets, this began when Jesus ordained his many apostles to preach the word with power throughout the world. And it continued on the day of Pentecost when he poured out his Spirit on the church, with the result that they all began to prophesy in tongues.

Listen to the description of this event in Acts 2:4, followed by Peter's explanation in Acts 2:14-18:

**All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them... Then Peter ... addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you ... [T]his is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy'" (Acts 2:4, 14-18).**

In the early church, Jesus sent his Spirit to empower the church for prophecy. Although modern churches often debate the continuing presence of such prophecy, no one can doubt that it was a powerful and prevalent ministry that Jesus used to establish his church in the early days of the kingdom.

But what about false prophecy? How was the Old Testament's expectation of the end of false prophecy fulfilled in Jesus? After all, many New Testament passages identify false prophecy as an ongoing problem for the church. We see this in Matthew 7:15 and 24:11, 24; 2 Peter 2:1; 1 John 4:1, and a number of other passages.

Well, the answer is twofold. On the one hand, false prophecy began to be restrained by the multiplication of true prophets, whose job it was to discover and condemn false prophecy.

Listen to Paul's teaching on this matter in 1 Corinthians 14:29:

**Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said (1 Corinthians 14:29).**

Paul made it clear that one job of the true prophets of the church was to root out and censor false prophecies.

On the other hand, it's clear that false prophecy is a continuing problem. But eventually, Jesus will completely do away with false prophets and their words. When he returns in judgment and consummates his kingdom, he will finally and irrevocably destroy all false prophets. Until that time, we live with the tension of knowing that Jesus has inaugurated his kingdom and begun to restrain false prophecy, but that he has not yet carried out the judgment that will end false prophecy forever.

Jesus is perfectly qualified for the office of prophet; he faithfully and truly performs the functions of a prophet; and he fulfills the Old Testament expectations for the office of prophet. And that is good news. In the Old Testament, God promised his people that one day a prophet like Moses would arise to lead his people into covenant faithfulness. And now, in Jesus, that promise is being fulfilled. For this reason, we recognize and honor Jesus as the greatest prophet of all time; we listen to and believe his words; and we submit to and obey his teachings. And we do so in the confidence that his prophetic word is sure, and that it will lead to our eternal enjoyment of God's covenant blessings.

Having examined both the Old Testament background and New Testament fulfillment of the prophetic office, we're ready to turn to our third topic, the modern application of Jesus' prophetic work.

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## MODERN APPLICATION

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One convenient way to approach the modern application of Christ's prophetic work can be found in the *Westminster Larger Catechism*, answer number 43, which says:

**Christ executeth the office of a prophet, in his revealing to the church, in all ages, by his Spirit and word, and in divers ways of administration, the whole will of God, in all things concerning their edification and salvation.**

In this answer, the catechism summarizes Christ's prophetic work in terms of his revelation to the church. And it mentions at least two aspects of Christ's revelatory work. First, it speaks of the extent of Christ's revelation, specifically, in all ages, by his Spirit and word, and in diverse ways of administration. And second, it identifies the content of Christ's prophetic revelation, namely, the whole will of God, in all things concerning their edification and salvation.

Because the summary offered by the *Westminster Larger Catechism* is so helpful, we'll use it as a model for our own modern application of Jesus' prophetic work. First, we'll consider the extent of the prophetic revelation Christ provides, and its implications for our lives. And second, we'll focus on the content of the prophetic revelation we receive from Christ, and the obligations it places on us. Let's turn first to the extent of the revelation we receive from our prophet Christ.

### EXTENT OF REVELATION

When the catechism says that Christ provides revelation to his church "in all ages, by his Spirit and word, and in diverse ways of administration," it affirms the biblical truth that Christ is the one who speaks to us through all of Scripture and true prophecy.

Jesus spoke many prophetic words himself, but he also sent his Holy Spirit to inspire true prophets before and after him, who themselves carried out their ministries in various ways. And the most important thing for us to infer from this process is that the whole Bible, both the Old and the New Testaments, is Christ's prophetic word to his church.

Now, it may seem strange to think that the whole Bible is Christ's word. After all, Jesus didn't write any books of Scripture. And even in the Gospels, there is a lot of material besides the quotations of things he said. But this has been the consistent teaching throughout church history.

For instance, the early church father Origen wrote of Jesus' prophetic work of inspiring Scripture in the preface to his work *On First Principles*, written in the early third century. Listen to what he said:

**By the words of Christ, we do not mean those only which He spoke when He became man ... for before that time, Christ, the Word of God, was in Moses and the prophets... Moreover ... after His ascension into heaven He spoke in His apostles.**

Origen's words, which have been affirmed throughout church history, state that Scripture, in all its parts, is the prophetic word of Christ. And this idea is entirely biblical.

For one thing, the Bible teaches that Jesus' prophetic ministry actually preceded his incarnation and earthly ministry because he inspired the Old Testament prophets.

Listen to the apostle Peter's words in 1 Peter 1:10-11:

**Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow (1 Peter 1:10-11).**

Peter taught that Christ had sent the Holy Spirit to inspire and motivate the Old Testament prophets as they studied and wondered about the fulfillment of God's promises of redemption. In this sense, the whole Old Testament is the word of Christ.

In the same way that Jesus' prophetic ministry began before his earthly ministry, it also continued after he ascended into heaven, because Jesus also sent his Spirit to inspire the apostles and the other writers of the New Testament in their work.

As Jesus said in John 16:13-15:

**"The Spirit of truth ... will guide you into all truth... All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you" (John 16:13-15).**

It's important for us to recognize that the whole Bible is Christ's word to us because it affirms that every book of Scripture is authoritative and relevant to the life of the modern church. To receive Christ as our prophet is to receive all his words to us as revelations of God's kingdom and covenant, including both the Old and the New



Testaments. We can't be satisfied to follow only the quotations of Jesus in the Gospels, or even all of the New Testament. We have to read, understand and obey everything in the Bible because it is all Christ's word to us.

Now, of course, we have to do this in ways that account for important historical changes. For example, later revelation, such as the New Testament, frequently shows us how to understand and apply earlier revelation, such as the Old Testament. But the basic principle remains unchanged: the whole Bible is the word of Christ for his church in all ages.

**When we come to the Bible, all of us, I think, find that we have favorite places, we have favorite sections of the Word, and many people rightly are drawn first of all to the Gospels and to the words of Jesus. It is the case, however, as the Word affirms and as the early Christians and the first generations consistently affirmed, that all Scripture is inspired by God, and so it's profitable, it's useful for teaching, and useful for correcting mistakes in our lives and showing us what the right way, what the straight and level way is, the life-giving way. So even though we're allowed to have certain preferences and be drawn to particular books and sayings, the whole witness of Scripture is important because we are whole people, and as we relate to others, this draws us together with God's Word as the centerpiece.**

— Dr. James D. Smith III

**Properly understanding Jesus as our prophet, the one who is the fulfillment of the entire prophetic revelation, that in him all of God's promises have come to pass, means that the Old Testament revelation is his word as well. The gospel messages where he directly speaks is his word. By extension as well, his calling of the apostles — they act as his emissaries, they act as the one by the Spirit under inspiration to give us his word and to teach us who he is and what he has done, so that, whether it's the Old Testament, whether it's the Gospels, whether it's the Epistles, the entire Bible is for us and for our instruction. It's God's word to us that we are to follow completely and read it all now in light of the coming of Jesus Christ and all that he has accomplished for us.**

— Dr. Stephen Wellum

With this understanding of the extent of Christ's prophetic revelation in mind, let's turn to the content of the prophetic revelation we receive from Christ, and the obligations it places on our lives.

## CONTENT OF REVELATION

The *Westminster Larger Catechism* summarizes the content of Scripture by saying that Christ prophetically revealed to his church “the whole will of God, in all things concerning their edification and salvation.” Now, in one sense, this is a very broad statement affirming the sufficiency of Scripture. But when we view it in the specific context of Christ’s office of prophet, it helps us see that the whole Bible was delivered to us by Christ, God’s chief covenant emissary, in order to instruct us regarding the terms of his covenant; and in order to motivate us to avoid its curses, and to pursue its blessings through faithful obedience. God’s will, then, is the terms of his covenant and its application to our lives. And our edification is our proper understanding of the terms of that covenant, while our salvation consists of covenant blessings.

The whole Bible is God’s covenant word to his people. And since Christ is God, the whole Bible is also his word. For example, Jesus frequently affirmed the perpetual validity of the Old Testament. And near the end of his ministry, he promised to send the Holy Spirit to his original apostles so that they could write and authorize additional Scriptures, which we now have in the New Testament.

Jesus also taught his followers how to apply God’s covenant stipulations in their own day. And he motivated them to obey God’s will so that they’d receive the covenant blessings and avoid divine judgment. As Paul later wrote, all Scripture has been given to the church in order to equip us to serve and to obey our Lord.

In line with these ideas, we’ll focus on two aspects of the content of Christ’s prophetic revelation in Scripture. First, we’ll describe how a proper understanding of his office of prophet can help us interpret all of Scripture, so that we are edified regarding God’s will. And second, we’ll describe how a proper understanding of Christ’s prophetic office can guide us as we submit to Scripture, so that we receive the covenant blessing of salvation. Let’s start with the idea that Christ’s role as prophet has implications for the way we interpret Scripture.

### Interpret Scripture

In the ancient Near East, people recognized their obligation to respond to the messages that suzerain kings sent through their ambassadors. The consequences for ignoring these messages were serious. And the same is true of God’s revelation. When God reveals his will to his people, he expects us to listen to his words so that we understand what he requires, and to respond to him obediently so that we receive his salvation. Seen in this light, the words of Scripture that Christ gave through the Holy Spirit are not just someone’s personal perspectives on issues, or illustrative truths. They are the covenant messages of the great king, and they require an obedient response.

As we read in Hebrews 2:2-3:

**If the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we**

**ignore such a great salvation? This salvation ... was first announced by the Lord (Hebrews 2:2-3).**

Those who reject Jesus' word are doomed to suffer eternal covenant curses. But those who receive his message in faith and obedience receive the covenant blessings of salvation and eternal life.

Because Christ's word in all of Scripture has always been intended to administer God's covenant with his people, the best way to interpret it is according to the structure of the covenant. As we have seen, the basic elements of this structure are God's benevolence toward us, the loyalty he requires of us, and the promised consequences of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience.

As we saw earlier in this lesson, these elements were prominent throughout the Old Testament before Jesus was born. Christ's apostles also wrote about these themes quite frequently after Christ's ascension into heaven. And beyond this, we can see the same themes in the prophetic ministry of Christ during his earthly ministry. For instance, Jesus talked about God's benevolence in passages such as Matthew 5:45 and 6:26-33. He taught the expectation of human loyalty, as we see in Matthew 25:14-30. And he emphasized the consequences that follow human responses, as we see in Luke 13:1-8 and 12:35-38.

If we keep these covenant structures in mind as we read the Bible, it will help us understand the meaning of all Scripture. Whether we are reading historical narratives, or poetry, or wisdom literature, or epistles, or works of prophecy, we should always ask questions like: How does this passage reveal the benevolence of God toward his people? How does it reveal the loyalty he requires of his people? What does it say about the curses that come on those who refuse to be faithful? What blessings does it offer to those who hear and obey? Everything Scripture teaches relates to God's benevolence, favor and help; to the requirements and laws he expects us to fulfill in our loyalty to him; and to the consequent rewards for obedience, and punishments for disobedience.

Followers of Christ are faced with countless questions and choices in the modern world. Every day, we make decisions about ourselves, our family, our work, our relationships, our churches, even national politics. The fact is that Christ's prophetic word to us addresses all these topics and more. God's covenant covers every aspect of our lives. And when we understand that Christ has given us his word as a means to live in obedience to God within that covenant, we are better prepared to understand that word, and to live in ways that honor God and lead to his blessings.

With this understanding of how Christ's role as prophet can help us interpret Scripture, let's consider the ways it can help us submit to Scripture so that we receive the covenant blessings of salvation.

## **Submit to Scripture**

There are many ways that we might summarize our obligation to submit to God's revealed will in Scripture, and we'll touch on several of them throughout this series. But in this lesson we want to look at these issues from the perspective of Christ's office of prophet.

We'll focus on the two ideas that prophets normally emphasized: repentance from sin to avoid the covenant curses; and faith in God to obtain the covenant blessings. Let's look first at repentance.

As you'll recall, one of the primary functions of prophets in the Old Testament was to threaten covenant curses in order to drive sinners to repentance. And this was also part of Jesus ministry in the New Testament.

Listen to how Matthew summarized Jesus' preaching in Matthew 4:17:

**From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 4:17).**

In fact, this theme can be found throughout the Old and New Testaments. It is one of the most common themes in all of Scripture. And because every bit of Scripture reveals God's will to us, repentance from the ways we fail to live up to his will is a legitimate application of every text.

As we all know, repentance is the act of turning from rebellion against God and submitting to his will. We turn away from our sin, and in the same motion we turn toward God in faith. Initial repentance takes place when men and women first come to Christ in saving faith. We hear the word of the gospel and repent of our sins. But it's also true that repentance should occur throughout the Christian life.

The Protestant Reformer Martin Luther picked up on this idea in the first of his famous 95 Theses, written in A.D. 1517. Listen to what he said:

**When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent," he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.**

Luther recognized that fallen human beings constantly sin, and therefore that even believers need to make repentance a daily practice.

One way to encourage repentance is to follow the model of Jesus and the Old Testament prophets by proclaiming the terms of God's covenant. When we tell unbelievers what God requires, we can exhort them to abandon their sin in order to escape the judgment of God's curses. And when believers hear the word of God and discover their own shortcomings, we also need to repent. Of course, true believers never need to worry about falling under God's eternal curses — Jesus made sure of that when he died on the cross for us. But it's still true that God sometimes disciplines us in ways that resemble his covenant curses, as we see in passages like Hebrews 12:5-11.

By encouraging and practicing repentance in our daily lives, believers honor Christ's prophetic work and pursue the blessings of God's covenant. But as we do this, it's important to recognize that godly repentance is not a matter of wallowing in despair over our sin. While this admission of guilt may bring sorrow, it's not designed to lead to despair. Rather, it's intended to restore our relationship with God, and our joy in him.

As we read in 2 Corinthians 7:10:

**Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret (2 Corinthians 7:10).**

**Every Christian, I think, is called to a lifestyle of regular repentance, that's confessing our sins and coming clean before the Lord. Jesus himself says we need to take up our cross daily, which is a hint surely not just that we're supposed to be prepared to suffer, but perhaps to go the way of the cross which is dying to our sins and seeking God's forgiveness, the cross is all about that. And so although, yes, there's great truth that when someone comes to the Lord for the first time and confesses their sins, yes, they are a new person and they are washed clean, and those are great truths which we need to hold on to. Yet, frankly, we all dirty our clothes on a pretty daily basis, and if we want to be washed white we need to come back for cleansing, for renewal. And the clear verses in the Old Testament which say, you know, there are great blessings for those who repent and come back to the Lord, who are not cherishing iniquity or hiding it in their heart, or Psalm 32, you know, "blessed is the person who the Lord does not account their sin," hold them accountable for their sins. And you see in that Psalm, you know, great joy as the person actually finds forgiveness. And that's an experience that Christians day by day can have, the joy of sins forgiven. So, incredible blessings as we pursue that discipline, repentance leading to new life.**

— Dr. Peter Walker

With this understanding of repentance from sin in mind, let's look at the matter of faith in God.

Jesus and other biblical prophets encouraged continued faith in God and obedience to his covenant so that their audiences would receive God's blessings. And this principle applies to modern Christians, as well. If we hope to receive the blessings of salvation when his kingdom comes in all its fullness, it's important for us to persevere in faith, and to demonstrate our faith by obedience to God's covenant. We see this in many places throughout the New Testament, such as Ephesians 2:8-10, 2 Thessalonians 1:4-12, Hebrews 12:1-11, and James 2:14-18.

As just one example, listen to the words of 1 John 5:3-4:

**This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith (1 John 5:3-4).**

As John taught here, true Christian faith overcomes — it perseveres — both in its commitment to God, and in its expression in obedience to God's commands.

Admittedly, it's a struggle to persevere in faith and obedience as we wait for God to fulfill his promises. But this same challenge has faced God's people in every age. It was true in the Old Testament, in the New Testament, and throughout church history. But we know that God's promises are sure, and that Christ will eventually return to finish what he started.

**You know, the apostle Paul is really clear in his letters about our motivation for faithfulness in Christ. It is to remember what Christ has done for us, remember our salvation. That is the most basic motivation. But, you know, Scripture is also very keen to inform us about other motivations. First of all, it's very honest about the fact that there's a day of judgment coming. We're going to give an answer for every idle word and every idle deed. Well, that ought to be a motivation to faithfulness. We also have the bigger picture which is that we will find our greatest joy in our deepest obedience. Who would not want that joy? Why would we rob ourselves of that joy knowing that our motivation is not just in order to avoid the punishment and judgment of God, but rather to receive the blessings that God gives us through obedience? Scripture's also clear about something else. We are living before a watching world, and our credibility in Christian witness has a great deal to do with whether the world can see us living faithfully in Christ. You know, that really raises the stakes, so to speak, and reminds us we have multiple motivations for faithfulness in Christ.**

— Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

One day, our faith will be utterly vindicated, when Jesus returns and we receive the full blessings he has prophesied. Repentance will be a thing of the past, and our faith will be rewarded. At that time, we'll all live in God's fulfilled and perfected kingdom on earth, enjoying all the blessings of his covenant. But until then, our lives in covenant with God are to be characterized by repentance from sin, and by perseverance in faith. And as we live in fidelity to our Lord, our current discipline will be lighter, and our future blessings will increase.

## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson, we've seen how Jesus of Nazareth fulfills and carries out the office of prophet. We've considered the Old Testament background to the office of prophet. We've looked at the fulfillment of this office in Jesus, noting that he meets the qualifications for the office, performs the functions of the office, and is bringing to fulfillment all the Old Testament expectations for the office. And we've explored the modern application of these ideas by focusing on the extent and content of Christ's prophetic revelation in Scripture.

Understanding Christ's office of prophet is extremely useful for every believer. It helps us orient ourselves to God's kingdom and his purposes. It teaches us to listen and to submit to the teachings of Jesus throughout the Bible. It gives us a framework for understanding his revelation to us. And it assures us that God will certainly fulfill all Jesus' prophecies about his return and our eternal salvation.

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