

# COVENANT FAITHLESSNESS

Isaiah 5 • Char Brodersen

**Introduction:** Good morning, church! We are continuing our series through the Bible this morning by considering The Story of the Prophets.

I'm not sure how many of you have made your way through the biblical prophets, but they can be difficult to read through because of their repetition and their references to people, places, and cultural practices that are so far removed from our modern times. (Tried reading through the Bible many times; always got stuck in Ezekiel.)

Because many of us have only given a cursory read to the Prophets or have relied on Bible-teaching ministries to interpret the Prophets for us, there seems to be a lot of confusion on what they are actually about.

Some think of the biblical prophets like Nostradamus, the French astrologer, apothecary, physician, and reputed seer who is best known for his book, *The Prophecies*, and said to have predicted many world events. Is the purpose of The Prophets simply to record future events—to give us God's divine timeline? Most books written on "Biblical Prophecy" today would have us think so. And to be clear, YHWH, the God of Israel, does in fact tell his prophets certain future events concerning Israel and the surrounding nations—but this is in order to distinguish himself from the so-called God's of the nations, and prove his uniqueness, preeminence, and absolute exclusiveness in being worshiped and served.

Others see the Prophets in the light of social justice and social reform, likening them to figures like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who spoke powerfully and profoundly against the injustices of the Antebellum South, the Jim Crow era, and the many injustices against the African American community.

Clearly, the Prophets are concerned with Israel's lack of care and concern for the poor and marginalized. They are denounced again and again and even judged for their injustices to the fatherless, the widow, the poor, and the foreigner. But is this primarily what the Prophets are about? Are the Prophets early advocates of social justice and defenders of the marginalized?

Lastly, many understand biblical prophets and prophecy to concern the coming of Messiah. The Early Church Father Eusebius said that the role of the Prophets was to announce and foretell the coming of the Messiah. As Calvary Chapel people who are committed to read and to study the whole of Scripture, we know that the Old Testament is filled with prophecies concerning Jesus, the Messiah. But is it accurate to say that this is what the prophets are about and what a prophet is—a herald of the Messiah?

Though each of the aspects is true to some degree, the vast majority of Old Testament prophecy (more than 92 percent) addressed Israel's immediate or imminent situation. To focus solely on the three we mentioned would be to emphasize a very small element of their role and content and to miss the message of the Prophets. So what are the Prophets primarily about?

## 1. Understanding the Prophets

### A. Covenant Whistleblower

- B. I think the most helpful way to understand the role of the Prophets and the writings of the Prophets is to see them as the covenant whistleblowers of Israel. The Prophets were men and women who were both called by God (we have a few of these stories in the writings) and sent by God to the kings, the leaders, the priesthood and to the nation as the whole—to either make clear God's standard or instruction laid out in the Covenant or to warn of, or predict the consequences and judgment, when

Israel forsook covenant faithfulness. The thing about whistleblowers is that when they come against a government or system, they often wind up dead; so too with the prophets.

- C. Remember, God redeemed the nation of Israel from their slavery in Egypt and had made a Covenant with them at Mount Sinai. He chose them that they would be his special people through which he would bring his redemption to the whole world. The document of that Covenant was the Law, or Torah, which laid out God's standard of right, of justice, of goodness for his people, Israel, that would result in their peace and flourishing. The Law was a vision and implementation of God's kingdom culture practiced by his people, and it could be summarized in two commands—Love and allegiance to YHWH and love of neighbor. God's desire was to bring Israel to himself—to dwell in their midst as he had done with Adam and Eve in the Garden, and he was giving them the house rules—this is how we live together in harmony, this is what it looks like to be in relationship with me, what it means to be my special people.
  - i. This is important for us to understand because almost everything we find in the prophets finds its roots in God's covenant with Israel. Both the blessings or standards to which the prophets call the people of Israel to, had been clearly laid out, as well as the curses or judgments in the case of their failure and faithlessness to uphold the covenant requirements. The Prophets are not really predicting the future in these instances. They are simply applying the blessings and cursing found in Deuteronomy 26:16–30 to their specific context. There's actually a clear and profound connection that the prophet Isaiah makes at the beginning of his oracle. In chapter 1, Isaiah calls upon Heaven and Earth as witness against Israel just as Moses had called up Heaven and Earth as a witness in the Covenant. The message is clear—the time for reckoning has come, the witnesses take the stand, and judgment is now at the very door.
    - a. God made it very clear that if Israel obeyed him, they would be blessed, they would prosper, but if not, God would bring judgment (the curse) upon them. That being said, it needs to be understood that the curse is not just a hex or haphazard thing, like a dark rain cloud that will follow Israel everywhere they go and sabotage all they do. No, it is very specific—if they reject God as their king and forsake the way of the covenant, God will visit their sin, iniquity, and rebellion—and the judgment or punishment will fit the crime (See footnote\*) Israel will lose the presence, the land, the blessing, and call to be a blessing to the nations.
    - b. This is an over-generalization and therefore doesn't apply to every prophet, but these are the main things we find the prophets doing and speaking about.
      - (i) **The Call of the Prophets**—to return Israel to its unique identity and calling in the world as God's light and witness to the nations. To be blessed and be a blessing.
      - (ii) **The Failure of the Prophets**—Israel will resist and will bear the consequences of their rejection of God and their sin. Judgment will come, and Israel will go into exile to Babylon.
      - (iii) **The Hope of the Prophets**—God will redeem Israel (and the whole earth as well) and restore her through her future anointed King (the Messiah). Hope in Messiah the King, look and wait for Messiah, the King! He is coming!

## 2. Reading the Prophets

- A. This pattern is very clear in the prophet Isaiah and may also help as a guide when we are reading the Prophets. There is actually a Hebrew poetic format to the Prophets. When we read them, they feel extremely repetitive and redundant, but the repetition is intentional.
- B. One way to understand is that we are listening to the Prophets through a set of headphones and the mix is not mono but in stereo. We're hearing the same song, but different parts are being highlighted in each of the speakers.

- C. The Hebrew prophets take up a theme, carry it out to a conclusion usually ending in either judgment and/or restoration, and then repeat by taking up same theme from a different point of view in carrying it out to its conclusion, either in judgment and/or restoration.
- D. For example: The Book of Isaiah develops its plot structure by presenting the central theme of the transformation of Zion (Jerusalem) seven times. So Isaiah has seven speakers who are highlighting different parts and instrumentation of the one song.
  - i. Isaiah details the path from a corrupt Jerusalem in the Old Creation to a renewed and transformed Jerusalem in the New Creation.
    - a. **The Judgment and Transformation of Zion, Part 1—1:2–2:4**
    - b. **The Judgment and Transformation of Zion, Part 2—2:5–4:6**
    - c. **The Judgment of the Vineyard and the Coming King—5:1–12:6**
    - d. **The City of Man vs. the City of God—13:1–27:13**
    - e. **Trusting the Nations vs. Trusting the Word of YHWH—28:1–37:38**
    - f. **Comfort and Redemption for Zion and the World—38:1–55:13**
    - g. **The Servants of YHWH and the New Creation—56:1–66:24**
      - (i) “We can divide the book of Isaiah into seven distinct conversations or discourses. In each one Isaiah is dealing with the topic of how we get from a corrupt Jerusalem in the first creation—a Jerusalem characterized by covenant disloyalty due to idolatry and lack of social justice—to a renewed, restored, transformed Zion in a new creation.” — *How to Read and Understand the Biblical Prophets*, Peter J. Gentry
      - (ii) We can see even through the literary pattern of the Prophets that God’s ultimate desire for his people is for their redemption, restoration, and flourishing, not their judgment.

### 3. Applying the Prophets

- A. When we read and apply the biblical prophets today, we should not read them in order to understand what is happening in our modern times—as we are in the habit of doing. It was and still is common for pastors to read the Prophets alongside the news headlines to try and tie what is happening in current events to biblical prophecy. This is not the correct way to read, interpret, and apply the Prophets. However, that does not mean that the Prophets can’t speak to us today. As we have said many times, though, the Scriptures are not written to us, they are written for us.
- B. And we can read the Prophets and be challenged in our own lives about the call to righteousness and justice according to God’s character and standard. We can learn and be reminded of God’s care of the poor, we can be exhorted and warned against the power of both political and cultural idols.
  - i. Just as Israel was called to give their loyalty and love to YHWH alone, so also the church is called to give our allegiance and loyal love to Jesus Christ and his kingdom alone. Just as Israel was to be a light to the nations around them of the goodness, righteousness, and justice of YHWH, so also the church is called the light of the world—a city set on a hill that cannot be hidden. And the way we live our lives—the ethics and politics of the kingdom of God—are to be practiced and lived out among us and through us that the world around us might see our GOOD works and glorify our Father in heaven.

## C. What might that look like in our lives?

### i. Idolatry

- a. As I said before, one of the main issues that the Prophets bring against Israel is their forsaking of the covenant through the sin of idolatry. They were redeemed by YHWH, they were his purchased people, unique among all the people of the earth. They were to belong exclusively to him, and yet they turned their backs on him and committed spiritual adultery.
  - (i) “Instead of being completely loyal to YHWH, they hedged their bets with Baal, the god of rain and the harvest, and other false gods used by humans to manipulate the powers that be; and instead of loving their neighbor as themselves, their lifestyle and society were filled with social injustice.” — *How to Read and Understand the Biblical Prophets*, Peter J. Gentry
    - (a) In many parts of Scripture and specifically Psalm 115, we see this direct connection being made between what humans worship, center themselves on, and what they eventually become like and reflect into the world around them.
    - (b) **“Their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see. They have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but cannot smell. They have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but cannot walk, nor can they utter a sound with their throats. Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.”** — Psalm 115:5–8
    - (c) Scripture teaches that we are made in the image of God, created to center our lives around him, to worship him, and to reflect his righteous character and goodness into the world; yet part of the brokenness of humanity through sin is that we worship and center our lives around things that are not God; we worship and center our lives on created things, and we become like them, reflecting their image and values to others and out into the world around us.
    - (d) The idols we worship are not usually images that we physically bow to or make burnt offers and blood sacrifices to. But they are absolutely idols—we just don’t use that language. We are just numb to it because it is so prevalent and don’t realize how much we sacrifice to career, to beauty, to power, to fame, to sexual experience and expression, to freedom, and to our own personal happiness. We pursue these and sacrifice to them blindly because they are so prevalent in our culture, and just like Israel, we will make political alliances to secure our idols of comfort and excess.
    - (e) “When human beings give their heartfelt allegiance to and worship that which is not God, they progressively cease to reflect the image of God. One of the primary laws of human life is that you become like what you worship; what’s more, you reflect what you worship not only to the object itself but also outward to the world around. Those who worship money increasingly define themselves in terms of it and increasingly treat other people as creditors, debtors, partners, or customers rather than as human beings. Those who worship sex define themselves in terms of it (their preferences, their practices, their past histories) and increasingly treat other people as actual or potential sex objects. Those who worship power define themselves in terms of it and treat other people as either collaborators, competitors, or pawns. These and many other forms of idolatry combine in a thousand ways, all of them damaging to the image-bearing quality of the people concerned and of those whose lives they touch.” — *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, N. T. Wright

- ii. I think specifically in the realm of idolatry, we have not realized the true implications of the Gospel.
- iii. The Gospel, or term “good news,” had its own significance in Jesus’ day because Caesar Augustus coming to power was proclaimed as “Good News” or Gospel. Caesar claimed to be the son of god who brought peace to the whole world through his reign and the Pax Romana. The Gospel writers then are subverting and challenging that claim saying that actually the True Son of God has come, in the person of Jesus Christ, and has established the true kingdom of peace. But this term “Good News” would also have had an older, deeper, and richer meaning for the Jews of Jesus’ time.
  - a. Again, Isaiah the prophet, in chapter 52, paints this vision of the people of Zion, of Jerusalem watching, waiting for a messenger who will bring the Good News—that their exile in Babylon is over, that judgment is complete. He writes, **“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, ‘Your God Reigns,’ Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices; together they shout for joy. When the Lord returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes. Burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God.”** — Isaiah 52:7–10
  - b. The good news is about God becoming King over Israel, taking back his rightful place, and that reign and salvation spreading to all nations.
  - c. So when the Gospel writers record that Jesus called people to repent in light of the Good News, it meant to turn from whatever political alliance or kingdom they belonged to and trusted in to receive the true King and his kingdom, and to join him in his campaign.
  - d. Sadly in our Western culture, we have relegated this call of Jesus to repent and believe to feeling sorry about our lives and giving mental assent that he is God and we need forgiveness. The Bible sometimes uses the word “believe” in terms of mental assent, but more often, and especially in the context of salvation, what God is calling for is our allegiance! He is calling us to be radically faithful to his King, to his kingdom, and his kingdom work.
  - e. “True faith or belief is not an irrational launching into the void but a reasonable, action-oriented response grounded in the conviction that God’s invisible underlying realities are more certain than any apparent realities ... With regard (then) to eternal salvation, rather than speaking of belief, trust, or faith in Jesus, we should speak instead of fidelity (faithfulness) to Jesus as cosmic Lord or allegiance to Jesus the king.” — *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King*, Matthew W. Bates
  - f. The Gospel of Jesus Christ undermines the claims of Caesar, but guess who else would be included in that? All rulers and all powers; all kingdoms and governments. Maybe for some of us who have heard “the Gospel” more times than we can count, today the Holy Spirit is calling you to reconsider how Jesus did through his life, death, and resurrection what tanks and bombs could never do, what the United Nations, what the U.S., what no president, Caesar, or king; what all charity and all good will, throughout all history, could never do. He, in weakness, suffering, and death establishes the kingdom of God and ushers in a kingdom of righteousness, justice, and peace.
  - g. The Prophets speak to us today, reminding us that YHWH, that King Jesus demands our exclusive trust and allegiance. Put your trust and your hope fully on Jesus Christ and his kingdom that is already present and still to come.

- iv. Now, as I was saying a moment ago, what and who we worship is directly tied to our values, to our character, to our ethics. The people of Israel were chosen and redeemed in order to both worship YHWH exclusively and to bear his name, reflecting his righteous character and goodness out into the world around them. But since they turned to other gods, they reflected the values, character, and ethics of those gods.
- v. “The sin of social injustice is a central theme that occurs repeatedly throughout the Prophets. Yahweh expects his people to live justly and to stand for justice. He is extremely serious about this, and the prophets place the sin of social injustice right next to idolatry. As part of this concern for social justice, the Prophets address a wide range of issues—judicial bribery, marketplace dishonesty, failure to pay just wages. However, perhaps the central concern of Yahweh reflected in the message of the Prophets is abuse, oppression, or even the neglect of the underclass, whom the Prophets identify as the widow, the orphan, and the alien or foreigner (sometimes the poor are included). This triad (widows, orphans, foreigners) is specifically mentioned eight times (alone) in Deuteronomy (10:18; 24:17, 19, 20, 21; 26:12, 13; 27:19).” — *Message of the Prophets: A Survey of the Prophetic and Apocalyptic Books of the Old Testament*, J. Daniel Hays
- vi. The Covenant required that Israel pay special attention to this group, providing them with justice in the courts as well as food (provision) and participation in the worship festivals. Yet as Israel and Judah abandoned their relationship with Yahweh, they quickly lost their motivation to care for the underclass. In general, they tended to completely ignore the commands of Deuteronomy in regard to those in the society who were weak and unprotected. This is one of the major sins that the Prophets focus on in their indictment of Israel and Judah.
  - a. How should we interpret and apply this theme today? One principle would be: God is very concerned for those who are weak, either physically or socioeconomically. He expects his people, since he lives in their midst, to be actively helping and defending such people.
  - b. “We need to explore applications from within the context of the biblical principle. For example, a relevant question to ponder is, Who today does not have enough political and economic clout to get justice or food? Minorities? Illegal immigrants? The poor? The elderly? Children? Abused women? The unborn? We have not really complied with the biblical mandate until we recognize how serious this issue is to God and realize that, as in ancient Israel, God holds his people (us) responsible to care for those who do not have the political or economic power to care for themselves.” — *Message of the Prophets: A Survey of the Prophetic and Apocalyptic Books of the Old Testament*, J. Daniel Hays
  - c. Historically, this has been exactly the kind of conversation and action that the church has been engaged in because this is the heart and character of our King. I believe it is time for us to get back to our King’s deep concern for the poor and marginalized of our own cities. Remember Jesus’ answer to the religious leader who asked, *And who is my neighbor?*
  - d. Church, for us, these are not progressive or conservative party issues. For us, this is tied back directly to our loyalty to Jesus Christ. Our King has laid out for us the politics of his kingdom, the characteristics we are called to cultivate and live out into the world. These are the people that our King has a bleeding heart for. This is where Jesus wants to be. Will we go with him, will we concern ourselves with the things that our King is concerned for?
    - (i) As we do, I believe we will be reading and applying the Prophets correctly.
      - (a) “Human salvation is directed toward God’s intention to restore individuals, communities, and the world as the kingdom of God continues to break into history. When we give allegiance [to the Lord Jesus Christ], we become new creatures set free from the enslaving power of sin. As we worship the Son of God, who is the authentic, original image of God, our own distorted Adamic image is transformed, so that

we are personally renewed. As we are transformed into the image of Jesus the Christ, we bring God's wise service, stewardship, and rule to one another and to the remainder of creation. — *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King*, Matthew W. Bates

As we worship Jesus, the true King, he forms and shapes our hearts to love what he loves. We become his peacemakers in the world, his people who are hungry for righteousness and justice, his people who are merciful, meek, and pure of heart. As we worship him, we reflect his image to one another and out into the world around us. Oh Lord, may it be so.

## Communion

As we come to the table of the Lord this morning, we come as a people of God, and he speaks his word of warning to us for our good. At this table, we find mercy. That is the heart of our God even seen in his judgments. The last word is mercy. God's mercy triumphs over judgment. So we come to this table to receive mercy, healing, renewal, and correction that we might align ourselves with our Lord Jesus and walk in his ways.

**This table is a weekly physical reminder—that we have been set free by the blood of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We are washed, we are clean. We have been given a new identity and a new purpose in Christ Jesus and that is to live for God and to live with God—and he is leading us forward to new creation. The more we take hold of this truth, the more we believe it, the more we live it. And our old self—the past, our sin, our slavery—will become a distant memory as we live into the new self, which has been redeemed by Jesus.**

We know that because of human sinfulness and brokenness, there is not one of us who has lived up to the ideal of what God created us for—to love him supremely and to love our neighbor as ourselves. So as we come to the table this morning, we come as a people in need of forgiveness and in need of redemption and salvation. And that is what Jesus offer us at this table—forgiveness, redemption, and salvation. His life for our life; his righteousness for our sin and brokenness.

## Prayer

*Most merciful God,*

*we confess that we have sinned against you*

*in thought, word, and deed,*

*by what we have done,*

*and by what we have left undone.*

*We have not loved you with our whole heart;*

*we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.*

*We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.*

*For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,*

*have mercy on us and forgive us;*

*that we may delight in your will,*

*and walk in your ways,*

*to the glory of your Name. Amen.*



## Appendix

An example of this is found in the text we read at the beginning (Isaiah 5) —The rulers and the wealthy of the land have not followed God’s heart and his instruction (recorded in the Torah) in caring for the poor but have in fact taken advantage of the poor, taken their land, not paid them their just wages and so God says —You partied, you ate and drank a lot of wine, but now you’re going into exile and you will be hungry and thirsty. You took the land of the poor, and built beautiful houses for yourselves but now the sheep of the poor and foreigners will feed among the ruins of the rich.

## Further Study and Reading

- *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry*, G. K. Beale
- *Interpreting the Prophets*, Aaron Chalmers
- *How to Read and Understand the Biblical Prophets*, Peter J. Gentry
- *Message of the Prophets: A Survey of the Prophetic and Apocalyptic Books of the Old Testament*, J. Daniel Hays