

## Group Study: The Word of the Lord (Isaiah 65)

1. How does the prophetic role as God's "spokesperson" help us understand Isaiah's bold tone?
2. The lesson highlights how much meaning is packed into the poetic language and metaphorical imagery of prophetic texts. Choose one image from the Isaiah passage (spreading a table for Fortune, filling bowls of mixed wine for Destiny, etc.) and unpack its layered significance with the group.
3. Imagine your family as one of those exiled to Babylon, now returning to your people's homeland after 70 years. How is Isaiah 65 a word of the Lord specifically for those returning from exile?
4. The lesson ends with a chance to practice reading prophetic literature. What did your study of Isa 66 reveal? What elements of worship and justice did you find, and what do they indicate about the state of the covenantal relationship? What connections do you see between Isa 65 and 66?
5. The lesson suggests that the prophets often see *outward* faith practices and ethical conduct as evidence of the people's *inward* condition. In other words, right relationship results in right action – not the other way around. When have you observed this connection, within yourself or in your community?
6. How does this chapter help us understand exile and restoration? What does exile and restoration look like in your community or world?
7. What might it look like for a modern community to respond faithfully to Isaiah's warning?

## **Good Faith Bible Study**

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### **"The Word of the Lord"**

**Making Sense: Old Testament Prophecy**

**<https://goodfaithmedia.org/bible-studies>**

“Thus says the Lord.” That has to be the gold standard of catchphrases, for biblical figures anyway. And the tagline belonged to the prophets for good reason, too. They were couriers of God’s word, delivering an expression of God’s will directly to the covenantal people, addressing the state of affairs in which they found themselves.

Consider, for a moment, the value of the messages they carried. What would you give for such a direct window of insight into how God regarded your situation—to see clearly the crucial steps that brought you there, and—given the same trajectory—where your path would inevitably lead? I don’t know about you, but most of my adult life has been spent not really knowing which moments were the crucial ones, and never really being able to see too far around the bend. When we read the prophets as scripture, watching them interact with God’s ancient people and parse their circumstances, and when we draw out from them the timeless truths about God’s character, and the age-old principles that govern our covenantal relationship, we shed light directly on the path of a life lived well.

Okay, so there’s treasure to be found in the prophetic books. But if I’m being honest, when I first started reading the Bible—really reading it, as a home for my soul and a space in which my own experience could make sense—I found the prophetic books to be opaque, enigmatic, sometimes eccentric, and always intimidating. It was just a big “here be dragons” in my Bible’s table of contents. Much of the early teaching I received on these books focused more or less exclusively on validating the prophet’s predictions of the future. But I didn’t need to be convinced about the prophet’s veracity or clairvoyance. I just wanted the cipher for decrypting their message.

There’s a well-regarded Old Testament interpreter—J. Daniel Hays—who has crafted a really useful but also accessible guide for learning about the prophets. It’s called *The Message of the Prophets*, and I’d recommend it to anyone ... well, sailing the prophetic seas in search of treasure. Although I haven’t listened to them myself, I think the book also has a set of companion audio lessons available. Occasionally I do wonder how my faith pilgrimage might have been different if someone early on had pointed out an option like Danny Hays’ *Message of the Prophets*. Anyway, this week’s Bible study in Good Faith Media magazine is certainly informed by that guide, and our goal here in this podcast is to extend the conversation a bit further.

So, one of the first things the Bible study suggests is that the prophets were almost like sentries, keeping a watchful eye on the covenantal relationship and looking for signs of danger—whether external threats or trouble from within. That emphasis has a lot to do with the difference between two ways of thinking about what prophets do: “foretelling” and “forthtelling.” Foretelling describes the prophet essentially “speaking beforehand”—predicting events or outcomes in the future. Forthtelling, however, has more to do with, well, “speaking forth”—whether it be truth to power or warning to the unfaithful. Although we have tended to pay far more attention to prophetic foretelling, the bread and butter of prophetic discourse is really about the admittedly less sensational forthtelling.

This distinction always makes me think of a very specific memory. During seminary, I worked as a warehouse janitor at an appliance repair shop. It was every bit as glamorous as it sounds. So one day I was making my rounds and wandered into the HVAC area, only to discover a repairman holding his blow torch directly on a Freon filter—basically a copper pipe filled with carbon and silicon beads. He was acting on sheer curiosity—just to see what would happen, really—and the filter was glowing red. “Uh... that’s not going to end well,” I warned, almost without thinking (and admittedly sharing his fascination). But I wasn’t foretelling anything—I had no idea what the future would hold. I was good at studying the Bible and cleaning warehouses, and this was neither of those. I was simply parsing out my friend’s present course of action.

From my vantage point, I could see with some certainty that it was the path to destruction. When the filter exploded like a firecracker, we were both pretty sure he had lost an eye. Don’t worry, he was fine, more or less—eye protection did its job—but for some minutes afterward he was physically shaking from the ordeal. Standing in front of a bathroom mirror surveying the damage, he asked of nobody in particular, “Why did I do that?” Then he said to me without looking, “I heard you warn me, and I should have listened. Now I can’t feel my face.” I have ruminated on that phrase off and on for decades, and said it to myself more times than I can count. I heard you, but I should have listened.

The prophets were always trying to get the people to listen. They had some insider knowledge on God’s will, sure, but they were mostly looking at the people’s covenant breaking—watching it glow hot red, and trying to intervene before the situation blew up in their face.

That’s what’s going on when Jeremiah (7:4) exclaims,

“Do not trust in these deceptive words: ‘This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.’”

The leaders were going around saying that the temple—a building constructed with human hands—was the source of power that made Judah immune to the existential threat posed by the

Babylonian empire. But Judah had more or less walked away from the covenant that the temple represented—and that relationship was the real source of life-giving power. They thought they were bulletproof, but tragically, they were completely exposed and eventually destroyed by the Babylonian army.

It's the same kind of thing when Amos (5:8) laments,

“Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord!

Why do you want the day of the Lord?

It is darkness, not light ...”

For Israel and Judah, the “Day of the Lord” was a day of reckoning for their neighbors, when they would be repaid for their cruelty to the tribes of Israel. Amos flips this idea on its head: Judgment day was coming, but it would be a reckoning for the Israelites—the inevitable result of generations of injustice and covenant infidelity.

So, the prophets are first and foremost forthtellers. If you've thought of the prophetic books as basically an archive proving that what God says will happen always happens, then a paradigm shift from foretelling to forthtelling might open up a whole new world for you. The prophets were absolutely fearless truth tellers, and collectively they left us with over 150,000 words that can test the mettle of our covenantal relationship. They're always calling us out, or calling us home, and in every case trying to get us to listen. The easiest way you can tune-in to this forthtelling is by asking, “How does this passage I'm studying tie into or connect with the essential prophetic message?” For more about that message, see this week's Bible study in *Good Faith Magazine*.

Alright, so ... realizing I probably need to get down from my “team forthtelling” soap box, we should address the fact that there is indeed some “foretelling” going on in the prophetic books. For that, we need to explain the so-called “near-far phenomenon.” With apologies for telling two stories in one podcast, the near-far phenomenon also recalls for me a very specific memory.

I grew up in Chugiak, Alaska—a relatively remote area outside Anchorage. I lived at the base of Bear Mountain, which, on an Alaskan scale, is not very big. The mountain is steep and also beautiful, but only the very tip of the highest peak reaches above the treeline. Over 125 miles away is another mountain, called Denali. Measured from base to peak, Denali rises 18,000 feet—making it bigger than Mt. Everest. On the clearest days, you can see Denali all the way from Chugiak. When I would ride my bike up the road to the post office, I could sometimes see Bear Mountain and Denali right next to each other. And for all the world, they looked to be the

same size. One was near, but modest in size, while the other was colossal—and an almost four-hour drive away.

This is the near-far phenomenon in prophetic literature. Sometimes the prophets are foretelling an imminent event or outcome—something just around the corner and connected directly to the immediate historical situation. In other cases, the prophets are looking way, way down the road to a distant moment when their prophetic word would be finally realized. Sometimes the text gives us clear indication whether we’re considering something near or far. In other cases, it can be very difficult or impossible to tell whether we’re looking at a Bear Mountain or a Denali.

In Jeremiah 25 (vv. 1-11), the prophet foretells the immediate judgment and exile. The Babylonians would conquer Judah a few years later, and the exile would last another 70 years. The context clearly indicates a “near” event. But a few chapters later, we find a classic example of Jeremiah looking far into the future: “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah” (Jer 31:31). Christian readers and scripture itself identifies this New Covenant with Jesus.

But another common example illustrates how challenging this phenomenon can be. Isaiah 7:14 reads: “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel.” Read in the context of Isaiah, the verse is clearly tied to its immediate circumstances and doesn’t give readers any reason to look ahead into the distant future. The gospel of Matthew, however, will recall the passage in a messianic light, and unmistakably identify the birth of Jesus as the prophecy’s fulfillment. So, this passage seems to anticipate both a “near” and “far” fulfillment.

When prophetic passages deal with events or outcomes that have not yet to come to pass, it’s important to consider the near-far phenomenon. Paying attention to the passage’s context is crucial, as is listening for clues in the prophet’s language. Does the passage reference particular kings or peoples, or even specific periods of time? Or does it use a more “someday” kind of speech, without getting too specific on the details? Sometimes, it can be very hard to tell one way or another. As we discovered in Isaiah 7, sometimes it can be both.

There is one last thing we have to mention about reading prophecy. I hesitate, because it’s not the easiest thing to describe, and it’s too much for any one Bible study or podcast. But it’s too important to go unmentioned. If you’ve been following these Good Faith Media Bible Studies or listening to these podcasts, you’ve probably picked up on the idea that context is absolutely critical for interpreting scripture. In this podcast, you might have noticed that all the references to a passage’s “context” have implied a historical setting. For most of modern biblical interpretation, the historical context has functioned as the key for reading prophecy. What I mean is that the history of the Israelites and their place in the ancient Near Eastern world provided the framework or point of reference for making sense of most any passage.

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## MAGAZINE

What's Jeremiah 7 about? You'd need to situate that passage in the context of Judah's final years, the political circumstances of its rulers and priests, and the relentless march of the Babylonian empire. To understand why it's such an ordeal for Amos to be addressing the ruler of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, you'd try to get a sense for the divided monarchy and the social norms of the prophetic office.

But in the last quarter century, biblical interpreters have made some pretty important discoveries in their studies, and this work has resulted in a subtle but tectonic shift. These days, the literary context of a prophetic passage is considered as much or possibly even more crucial than the historical context. Interpreters are careful to pay attention to the surrounding passages—their contents, themes and tone—as they really can play an important role in making sense of any prophetic text.

This is perhaps especially true for the Minor Prophets. In fact, many interpreters consider the “Book of the Twelve” to be a better name for this part of scripture, as their literary structure is best described as 12 volumes in a collected works.

I would always encourage anyone studying prophecy to learn as much as possible about the historical situation. But readers of prophecy can also be encouraged that they're already holding a valuable and essential interpretive tool in their hands. Even if your study group doesn't have a biblical historian on hand, together you can draw on the surrounding scriptural context of the passage to make sense of what you're reading.

So, to summarize the Bible study and podcast together, we might describe the prophet as a representative spokesperson for God. They functioned as sentries “manning the watchtower” all throughout the story of God's people in the promised land. In this role they were primarily “forthtellers,” though that responsibility often turned their attention to what had not yet come to pass, and occasionally even to the distant future.

Tasked with this incredible and genuinely profound calling, their preferred medium was poetry—affording their words the power necessary to get their message across. Yet for all their complexity and intensity, their common message was relatively simple: Injustice and hypocritical worship had made it evident that the covenant was broken; without repentance, judgment would result—but even in judgment there was hope for restoration. A rich and truly unique collection of prophetic books forthtells this simple message, and we can draw on that abundant context to hear—and perhaps even listen to—the word of the Lord.