



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

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

### What do you think?

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### Christian Reflection

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# Prophecy From the Sidelines

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

## Prayer

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

## Responsive Reading†

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Reflection

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

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



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

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

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

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

### Study Questions

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

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

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

# Prophecy From the Sidelines

## Lesson Plans

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

## Teaching Goals

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

## Before the Group Meeting

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

## Prayer & Scripture Reading

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

## Responsive Reading

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

## Reflection

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

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

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

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

### Study Questions

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

### Departing Hymn

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