

## The True Prophet

*(Highlights from Deuteronomy, Part IV)*

First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois — May 28, 2017 (Sunday after Ascension)

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### Deuteronomy 13:1-5

"If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, 'Let us go after other gods,' which you have not known, 'and let us serve them,' you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

"You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house

## Highlights from Deuteronomy

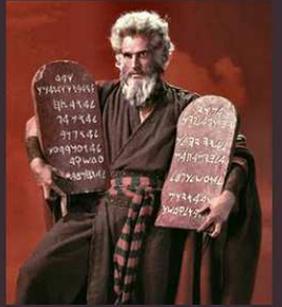
### Part IV

#### Deuteronomy

13:1-5; 18:15-22

Acts 1:1-9

Matthew 28:16-20



of slavery, to make you leave the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst."

### Deuteronomy 18:15-22

"The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers — it is to him you shall listen — just as you desired of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.'

And the LORD said to me, 'They are right in what they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.'

And if you say in your heart, 'How may we know the word that the LORD has not spoken?' — when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him."

### Acts 1:1-9

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

### Matthew 28:16-20

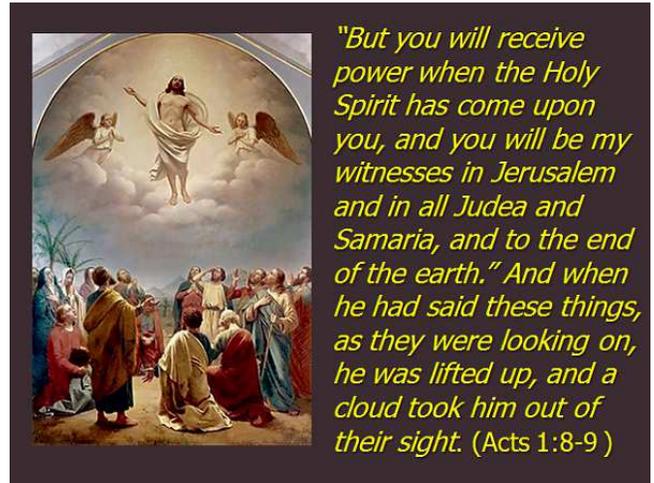
Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted.

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

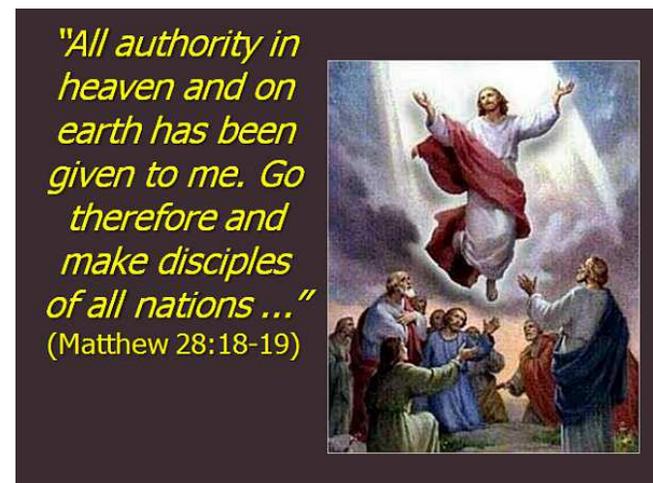
Today we resume our series of teachings on "Highlights from Deuteronomy." But because today is the Sunday after Ascension Day, which was Thursday, I've added two readings from the New Testament. In the selection from the very beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, Luke tells us how Jesus appeared to his disciples for forty days after the resurrection, teaching them about the kingdom of God. Then, on the fortieth day when they came together, the disciples asked Jesus if he would restore the kingdom to Israel.

Perhaps they meant, "Will you now, as the risen Lord, take authority over the land of Israel and lead it to new heights of glory, and to victory over its enemies?" Whatever they meant by their question, Jesus doesn't give them a straight answer. Instead, as they look on in amazement, Jesus is taken up from them into a cloud of glory — the event we know as the Ascension, or the ascent of Jesus to rule at the right hand of the Father. As Psalm 47 declares, "God has gone up with a shout, the LORD with the sound of a trumpet. Sing praises to God, sing praises! Sing praises to our King, sing praises! For God is the King of all the earth." We don't read of any trumpets at Jesus' Ascension, nor any shouts of triumph, but the church has always considered that Psalm appropriate for Ascension Day.

So Jesus' answer to the disciples' question, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" receives an answer with a scope much greater than their question. Jesus is exalted to the throne of God — to rule not only over Israel but over all the earth, and all creation. We get further insight into this in what Jesus tells his disciples at the end of Matthew's Gospel, in what we call the "Great Commission": "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).



*"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. (Acts 1:8-9)*



*"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ..."*  
(Matthew 28:18-19)

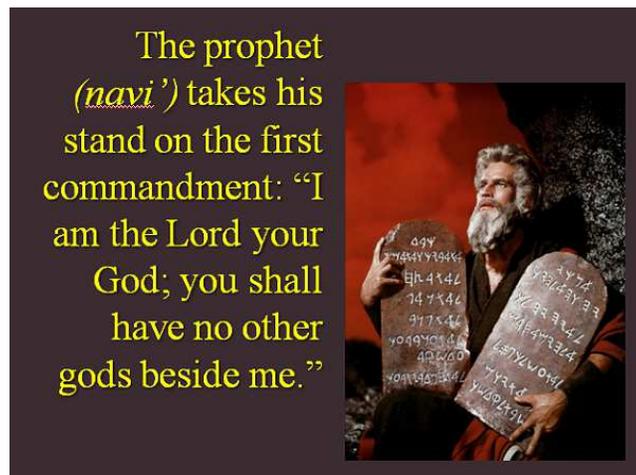
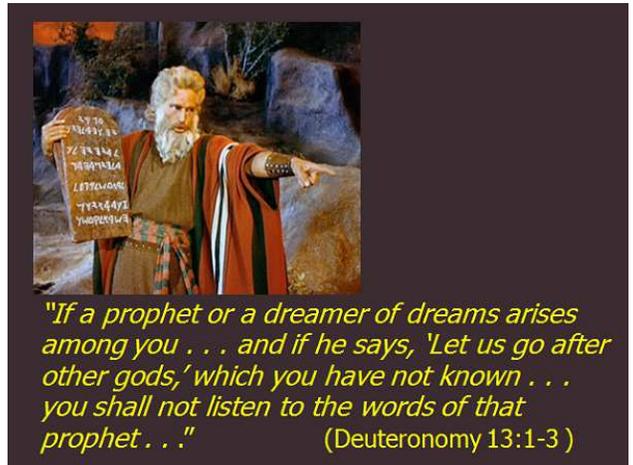
Ascension Day is teaching us that the risen Jesus has authority over all creation — not just in heaven, but over the earth as well. And his earthly rule is affirmed throughout the New Testament, just as he taught us to pray: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." To us, it often looks as though Jesus has no earthly power. But if we believe the Scriptures, we need to recognize that earthly powers and cultural norms are in rebellion against the real Ruler of all things, and one day their rebellion will be put down for good, as the Revelation to John declares in the Bible's final pages. And it's a prudent idea to get on the winning side of things. As the saying goes, "I read the back of the book, and *we win!*"

There is only one Ruler of this earth, and of all creation. That's the point Moses is making as he addresses the people of Israel in that great sermon we call the Book of Deuteronomy. In giving his people the Commandments the Lord has declared, "You shall have no other gods beside me." Moses has taught the people their creed, or statement of faith: *Adonai eloheynu adonai echad*, "The Lord is our God, the Lord alone." In the passage we read from Deuteronomy 13, Moses warns them that anybody who teaches otherwise is a false teacher. He says, "If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, 'Let us go after other gods,' which you have not known, 'and let us serve them,' you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams" (Deuteronomy 13:1-3). It doesn't matter how many miraculous or exciting things a prophet does, or even if the things he predicts about the future

somehow come true. If that prophet is leading you away from service to the one true God, and suggesting that you follow some other authority, *don't listen to him*. Get as far away from him as you can, Moses says; don't let him into your circle of influence. "So you shall purge the evil from your midst."

We need to be clear what a true prophet really is, in the Bible. We usually think of a prophet as someone who can predict the future, disclosing the course of events to come. But if we read the prophetic books of the Old Testament, we discover that's not the primary function of a prophet.

The Hebrew word is *navi'*, which means a spokesman for God, someone who can declare the word of the Lord because he has insight into the mind of God. And what, according to Scripture, is the most prominent thought in the mind of God? I think we could say it is this word: "I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods beside me." These are the words the Lord uses when he states the terms of his agreement, or covenant, with his people. In other words, "If you're going to be my people, you have to *let me be your God*, and no one else." These terms are repeated several times on the Bible, in a statement that goes like this: "I will be your God, and you will be my people" (e.g., Jeremiah 7:23). These are the terms by which God agrees to be with us. We find these terms restated at the very end of the New Testament, in the Revelation to John: "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God" (Revelation 21:3).



The role of the prophet is to uphold this agreement, this covenant. So the main declaration of the prophet is not to foretell future events but to call the people of God back to loyalty to their one Lord. Obviously, any prophet that departs from this mission is a false prophet who hasn't really heard from the Lord and doesn't have the mind of God. It doesn't matter how many amazing things such a prophet can do, or how accurately he can predict things to come. If he tries to lead people away from the Word of God to some other authority, or to replace the values and principles the Lord has given his people with something else, he is a false prophet.

So the job of the true prophet, in the Bible, is to take a stand for the worship of the one God, the Lord (or *Yahweh*, his proper name in Hebrew). And whenever the prophet finds the people violating the basic commandment, "You shall have no other gods beside me . . . You shall not bow down to them or serve them," the prophet declares the judgment of the Lord against his own community. That's where the prophets begin to predict future events: in the declaration of serious consequences to follow when the people desert their God.

Typically, the prophet's utterances follow a pattern like this: "This is what the Lord requires; this is how you've failed him; therefore these are the judgments against you that will take place." (That's his "sermon outline.") As you can see, often in the history of Israel the prophet's predictions of the future paint a dismal scenario. An example is this passage from Hosea, chapter 4:

Hear the word of the LORD, O children of Israel, for the LORD has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land; there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. Therefore the land mourns, and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field and the birds of the heavens, and even the fish of the sea are taken away (Hosea 4:1-3).

In this prophet's vision, when God's people turn away from him and become selfish and self-serving, even nature suffers the consequences. It's not just conflict between people, or nations, or ideologies that grips a world in rebellion against the ways of God. Even the earth and its environment suffer when people act selfishly, in ignorance of the responsibility the Lord put upon human beings in Adam, to "tend and keep" the beautiful garden he had placed them in (Genesis 2:15).

This explains why the apostle Paul can say, in Romans 8:19, "For *the creation waits with eager longing* for the revealing of the sons of God" — those people who will live in the power of Jesus' resurrection and take part on the restoration of this earth to what the Lord intended it to be at the beginning. Other prophets, then, look ahead not only to judgment to follow when God's people who desert him, but to the new creation to come when God forgives their sin and restores this earth. A prominent example is Isaiah 40:1-5:



The prophet's typical "sermon outline":

- This is what the Lord requires
- This is how you've failed him
- Therefore, these bad things will happen to you!

**The prophets look ahead to God's new creation.**

*"The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."*  
(Isaiah 40:5)



Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

So we can see that it's the issue of sin and forgiveness — the sin of deserting the Lord, and the redemption of his mercy — that gives rise to the prophets' predictions of things to come. When a prophet in Scripture speaks of

future events, that's never just to satisfy our curiosity or to create excitement about something spectacular about to unfold. It's always a response to where we stand in relation to that fundamental command, "You shall have no other gods beside me," and that basic statement of biblical faith, "The Lord is our God, the Lord alone." At the very end of Deuteronomy, Moses declares the same future judgment upon God's people: If you stay faithful to the Lord and walk in his ways, things will go well for you — "But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish" (Deuteronomy 30:16-18).

So notice that, in our passage from Deuteronomy 18, Moses makes this promise: "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers — it is to him you shall listen" (18:15). Christians have always understood that Jesus is the fulfillment of this promise of "a prophet like Moses." Jesus stated clearly, in what we call his "Sermon on the Mount," that he hadn't come to do away with the Law of Moses but rather to bring it to completion (Matthew 5:17). Paul declares that "Christ [the Messiah] is the end of the Law" (Romans 10:4), meaning not that Jesus does away with the Law but that in himself he brings to completion what the Law had in mind all along. Matthew even writes his Gospel presenting the



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(Deuteronomy 18:15)

teachings of Jesus in five large blocks, imitating the five books of the Law of Moses. There is, indeed a law that Jesus gives us, what we call the Great Commandment: Love the Lord with all you have, and your fellow human being as yourself (Luke 10:27). Paul speaks of this as a law for us to follow, in Galatians 6:2: "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."

And that brings us back to the Ascension, when Jesus takes leave of his followers in physical form and assumes his rule over all things, sharing in the glory of the Father. Just as Moses, in his last words to Israel, "lays down the law," so to speak, with his people, so Jesus, in his last words on earth to his followers, "lays down the law" to us: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). Christians have tried to follow Jesus' directives here by proclaiming the good news of deliverance through his cross, by calling people into discipleship of the risen Lord, and by baptizing those who respond into the new family of God. But I think we have too often forgotten the last part of this Great Commission: "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."

*"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."  
(Matthew 28:19-20)*



There is a life to be lived in conformity to the teaching of Jesus, as it's recorded for us in the Gospels. It's a life of compassion toward those in need. It's a life of freedom from resentment and self-protective behavior. It's a life of forgiveness toward those who have wronged us, because we need forgiveness ourselves and can't receive it till we forgive others: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."

I'd like to say something at this point that may make you uncomfortable. This church has been through some difficult times in recent years, and people have left this fellowship because hard feeling have arisen over one matter or another. Only a short time ago I listened online to a panel of three people associated with the church we formerly were part of in Wheaton, Illinois — Church of the Resurrection. These three people, two of them clergy and one a lay person, had been involved in a series of splits in the church. One was the former pastor who had been, in effect, driven out of the church. One was the current pastor who had been part of the group that had driven him out. The third person had become so angry with the leadership that she and her family had left. But all three of these people had reconciled. The two clergy were working together in mission, and the lay person had returned to the church she had left and is now a deaconess. They had realized how selfish they had been, how they had each been at fault and mistreated one another. They had confessed their faults and become reconciled, just as James says: "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (James 5:16).

I knew all three of these people, and it made a significant impression on me to see them acknowledging, before an audience at Wheaton College, how petty and shortsighted they had been and how the Lord had led them to confess their sin and become reconciled. In effect, they had "borne one another's burdens, and so fulfilled the law of Christ." It occurred to me that, as you prepare for a new pastor to come to this congregation, it would be a healthy thing for this church to experience such a time of public confession and reconciliation with those who have left during past times of turmoil. This would not be for the purpose of persuading them to return to this fellowship. It would be for the purpose of *bringing healing to this*



**A Story of Reconciliation**  
(Church of the Resurrection, Wheaton, IL, May 11, 2017)  
*"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." (Galatians 6:2)*

*congregation* as you move forward. How the Lord would bring this about, I don't know; I just want to plant this seed with you, for you to pray about.

Finally, as we consider how to obey Jesus, our "prophet like Moses," I would remind how he directed his disciples just before his Ascension, as Mark records his words at the end of his Gospel:

And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents with their hands; and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover." So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God (Mark 16:15-19).

*"And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents with their hands; and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover."  
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If we're going to "observe all that Jesus commands us," we may need to become a little more adventurous in how we express our faith, as the Holy Spirit leads. We need to get aggressive in "casting out demons," confronting dysfunctional behavior in friends or family members, or even ourselves. We need to show more enthusiasm, even more abandon, in our worship. I don't say we need to literally pick up snakes, but we could become less cautious about adopting different ways of doing things; sometimes new ideas make us as fearful as would a serpent or a bottle of poison! And we shouldn't be shy about laying hands on

people for their healing, and believing for their recovery. We've seen it happen and we know Jesus wants us to do it. If we observe Holy Communion each week, according to his directive, why wouldn't we also see more people coming forward for healing during our time of worship?

We'll say more about these things next Sunday, on Pentecost when we remember how the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles in flames of fire and they first preached Jesus risen from the dead. So please *wear red to church* next Sunday, if you can!

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