

## *LEARNING FROM BIBLE PROPHECY*

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A dynamic preacher electrified his audience with these words:

The Bible says that in the last days Israel will become a nation one generation before Jesus returns again. Israel became a nation in 1948. The true church will be raptured seven years before the second coming — in 1981. Then Jesus will come again in 1988.

For obvious reasons this particular interpretation has fallen out of favor.

Many people avoid studying Bible prophecy because they are confused by the conflicting views. Some have been repulsed by the shallowness and wrongness of many of the interpretations of the sensationalists. We must avoid the extreme of being preoccupied with the study of unfulfilled prophecy and the other ex-

treme of refusing the study of Bible prophecy altogether.

God has spoken to man through his inspired spokesmen. Prophecy makes up a large part of our Bible. Bible students must give attention to learning from Bible prophecy.

## *NATURE OF PROPHECY*

God revealed messages to prophets and guided them by inspiration of His Holy Spirit to declare His truth through spoken or written communication. "God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets" (Acts 3:21). In the Bible true prophets were those who were divinely inspired spokesmen for God. To call present-day preachers prophets is to use the word in an unbiblical manner. God, not man, is the source of prophecy. No prophecy originated in the prophet's own mind. "No prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (II Pet. 1:21).

God spoke to His people through his servants, the prophets. They received and declared messages from God. They were men of God. They were called by God, directed by him to bear messages. Their messages were often authenticated by supernatural signs. They were divine spokesmen announcing judgment, calling people to repentance. Bible prophecy included teaching, command, admonition, warning and prediction.

The prophets opposed the false religions of their day. Elijah contended with the prophets of Baal in the ninth century (I Kgs. 18:20-36). Amos confronted the priest of the golden calves at Bethel (Amos 7:13). Isaiah declared the land is "full of idols" (Isa. 2:8) and condemned the drunken prophets and priests (28:7).

The prophets stressed righteousness and denounced sin. Amos castigated the rich who grind down the poor. Jeremiah complained of those who "were well-fed lusty stallions, each neighing for his neighbor's wife" (Jer. 5:8).

Prophecy was not limited to prediction but certainly included

predictions of future events. In predictive prophecy future events were announced before they occurred with exactness that could not be mere human guesswork. Persons were named and described before birth. Kingdoms were sketched before their existence. Predictive prophecy is found in all parts of the Bible and requires special attention in interpretation.

### BENEFITS OF STUDYING PROPHECY

Learning from Bible prophecy is of great value to the Christian.

*Fulfilled prophecy is a strong evidence that the Bible is the word of God.* God made it plain through Moses that predictive prophecy was one way to verify that one was a true prophet with a valid revelation from God (Deut. 18:20-22). Isaiah also stated that fulfilled prophecy demonstrated that God had spoken (Isa. 41:20-23; 44:6-8).

*Fulfillment of Messianic prophecy demonstrates the deity of Jesus.* During the last supper Jesus made some predictions to His apostles. He added, "I tell you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he" (John 13:19). Matthew identifies many events in Jesus' life which are direct fulfillments of Old Testament prophecies, thus certifying His Messiahship. Not only in the Gospels but also in the preaching of Acts the faith-building evidence of fulfilled prophecy is marshalled.

*The study of Bible prophecy helps one understand that God is in control of this world and human history.* A person who knows only current events and knows little about history lacks a balanced perspective on the present because of an ignorance of the past. One who knows history only from man's point of view lives in a flatland of two dimensions but no depth of meaning and purpose to it all. What a blessing it is to have in divine prophecy God's perspective and interpretation of the world and human

history.

Reading or listening to current news headlines one may question if God is really in control of things. A study of the prophets will teach one that nations rise and fall, individuals have their successes and failures, evil at times seems to prevail, but through it all "God is the ruler yet."

Fainthearted souls made fearful by the threat of nuclear destruction and the doom and gloom of modern voices need to study Bible prophecy. Reassurance, confidence and inner strength come from knowing that God is still in charge of this universe. If we are faithful unto death, we shall receive the crown of life (Rev. 2:10). Ultimate victory is promised to the overcomers (Rev. 17:14). Hearts grow spiritually strong from studying Bible prophecy.

*Spiritual blessings come to those who read God's prophetic word.* In the revelation of Jesus Christ to the apostle John we read, "Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written therein; for the time is near" (Rev. 1:3). Bible prophecy, as a part of scripture, is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (II Tim. 3:16).

The ignorance about the true meaning of Bible prophecy on the part of the religious teachers of Jesus' day bore tragic fruit as they rejected Jesus. God's people suffered dire consequences when they did not hear and heed God's warnings. Peter said,

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which *he has granted to us his precious and very great promises*, that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion, and become partakers of the divine nature (II Pet. 1:3,4, emphasis added).

A great benefit of learning from Bible prophecy is that we can be partakers of God's nature as we lay hold of His promises.

## APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF PROPHECY

Some Bible students and teachers are preoccupied with the study of Bible prophecy, usually unfulfilled prophecy. Other Christians are totally fed up with prophecy, not wanting to hear another word about the Anti-Christ or Armageddon. Still others are uninterested in Bible prophecy, preferring more practical things. None of these represents the best approach.

*Several inadequate approaches must be avoided.* One is the mistaken view that Bible experts alone can understand Bible prophecy. It takes effort but every Christian can profit from a study of prophecy.

Another inadequate approach is the view that every prophecy must be fulfilled literally. A popular teacher expressed it this way, "Every single prophesied event fulfilled in the past has been literally fulfilled." Sensationalists have sold many books popularizing this view as the only Bible-believing position.

It is true that some prophecies were fulfilled literally. Christ was born in the literal city of Bethlehem (Micah 5:2; Matthew 2:6). Christ entered Jerusalem riding on a literal donkey (Zech. 9:9; Matt. 21:5). A virgin gave birth to a son (Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:22,23). Soldiers literally divided Christ's garments and cast lots (Psa. 22:18; John 19:23,24).

However, the view that all prophecy must be fulfilled literally does not square with Biblical facts. Some prophecies were meant to be figurative, not literal. John the Baptist did not literally fill every valley and level every mountain and hill (Isa. 40:4; Luke 3:5). Christ was not a literal stone rejected by builders (Psa. 118:22; Acts 4:11; I Pet. 2:7).

In several of Jesus' own prophecies a figurative not literal meaning is intended. He did not mean He would rebuild the literal temple in three days (John 2:19-21). In promising living water He did not mean physical water or physical thirst (John 4:14). Peter says what happened in Acts 2 is a fulfillment of Joel 2:28-32. There was no blood, smoke, darkened sun or moon turned to

blood. It was a real fulfillment of a figurative prophecy.

The liberal approach to prophecy must also be rejected. Unbelieving Biblical criticism rejects supernatural revelation and miracles, preferring natural explanations. Liberal interpreters are skeptical about many Biblical events and often deny predictive prophecy. They suppose that accounts had to be written after the events plainly referred to, because foretelling them was not possible.

The Bible stands true as the infallible Word of God in spite of the efforts of the critics to make it merely a human book.

*The right approach is to study the text of a prophecy in the light of its grammatical meaning and its historical context, and to seek to understand the author's intended meaning.* The Bible student must ask questions such as: Was the statement (or statements) intended to be understood figuratively or literally? Was the message intended for the Jews, the church or for another limited audience? Several special principles of interpretation pertain primarily to prophecy; however, all interpretation of Bible prophecy must find its basis in the historical-grammatical method of study.

## PROBLEMS IN UNDERSTANDING BIBLE PROPHECY

The study of prophecy is more difficult than most of the rest of the Bible. However, the wonderful truths in Bible prophecy are not out of the reach of any Bible student. Before considering guidelines for understanding Bible prophecy attention will be given to special difficulties encountered in the study of prophecy.

*Many predictions are not clear or are not given in a complete form.* Different prophecies are given with different degrees of fullness and clarity, according to the different purposes for which they are intended and the degree to which the Lord wishes to

make the future clear at the time of the utterance. Predictions tend to be fragmentary, paradoxical and veiled in meaning. The future is to be only partially revealed and, as the circumstances accompanying the fulfillment are in the unknown realm of the future, mistaken concepts of it are to be expected. Prophecy is naturally partial and pictorial.

*Often predictions were far different from what would be normally expected.* God's thoughts are not as man's thoughts (Isa. 55:1-8). It is not surprising that finite minds have difficulty grasping the whole picture in the mind of the infinite God. Great extremes, such as the eternal rule of the Messiah and His sufferings and death, are difficult to grasp and harmonize. The language of a people has no established words or expressions to describe concepts and events outside of their experience. The prophets had to use familiar words and expressions in a figurative sense to represent the things prophesied. The spiritual kingdom of Christ was necessarily predicted in the words and pictures familiar to the Israelites.

*Prophecy is often characterized by unusual use of language.* Much that is to happen in the future is told in present or past tense (Joel 2:27,28; Hosea 11:1). Isaiah 53:1-10a uses past tense and Isaiah 53:10b-12 uses future tense, yet both predict the future. Present tense is used of a future prediction in Zechariah 9:9.

Events widely separated in time may be stated in the same passage without any time indicators. In the Lord's prophetic address about the destruction of Jerusalem and His second coming it is difficult to determine which statements refer to which event (Matt. 24; Mark 13; Luke 21). In Mark 8:38-9:1 the second coming and the establishment of the church seem to be predicted without any reference to time. Several hundred years of history are jumped between Joel 2:27 to 2:28. This can be seen in Genesis 3:15 and Isaiah 61:1-3.

*Prophecy is often expressed in highly figurative and symbolic language.* "God spoke by the prophets in many parts and in many ways" (Heb. 11:1, original translation). God meant what

He said and said what He meant, but He often used a figurative word or a symbolic thing, person, or event to express what He wanted to say at that time. Such picture language was often easier to remember than it was to interpret fully until later revelations or events made sure what was meant.

Many figures of speech appear in prophecy, for example in Isaiah 55 mountains and hills sang and trees clapped their hands. Proverbs, parables, fables, hyperbole and idioms were used by the prophets. Much prophecy was expressed in poetic form with the characteristic of Hebrew parallelism and the usual extravagant imagery or exaggerations common in poetry. Vivid, dramatic imagery was employed, for example, Ezekiel's valley of dry bones (37:1-6), Daniel's vision of four beasts (7:1-28), Isaiah's exalted vision of God (6:1-13), Amos' plumbline (7:7-9), and the laments of Jeremiah (Lam. 1-4).

Symbols and types were also used in prophecy. A symbol is something used to represent something else. The "arm" of the Lord was used to represent the strength of the Lord (Isa. 53:1). Names (Babylon, I Pet. 5:13), numbers (seven, Rev. 4:5), colors (pale, Rev. 6:8), things (bowls of incense, Rev. 5:8), and animals (lamb, Rev. 5:6,9,12) are used symbolically.

Care must be exercised in understanding symbols because a thing may be used to represent more than one thing. Sheep represent man's waywardness in Isaiah 53:6 but a lamb is used to represent Jesus as sacrificial savior in John 1:29.

A type is a divinely planned predictive symbol. It is an actual person, place or thing used to represent and prefigure a person, place or thing in the future. Elijah was a type of John the Baptist. Malachi announced God's promise to send "Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD" (4:5, NASB). John denied that he was literally Elijah (John 1:21). But Jesus said, "He is Elijah who is to come" (Matt. 11:14, see 17:11,12). The angel, Gabriel, announcing John's birth said, "He will go before him [Christ] in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17).



Speculative interpretation that multiplies types imaginatively must be avoided. The identification and interpretation of types must be guided by New Testament use and explanation. Adam was a type of Christ (Rom. 5:14; I Cor. 15:22). Moses was a type of Christ (Deut. 18:14; Acts 3:22-26). The Sabbath was a type of eternal rest (Heb. 4:4-7; Col. 2:16,17). The brass serpent was a type of Christ's death on the cross (Num. 21:8,9; John 3:14,15).

The prophets were preachers who used everyday language. The blessings of the coming kingdom were stated in agricultural terms. They spoke in times of crisis often using arresting, emotional language in an effort to get the people's attention. They were trying to motivate to repentance. They painted vivid pictures. For example, Nahum graphically describes the siege, conquest and destruction of Nineveh (2:1-13). Some rebukes were blunt and harsh. Isaiah called the watchmen "dumb dogs" (Isa. 56:10).

Messages were sometimes conveyed by symbolic actions. Ezekiel shaved his head and beard. He divided the hair into three equal parts. He burned one third, cut one third into small pieces with a sword, and scattered the other third in the wind. This showed God's judgment on Jerusalem in which one third of its population would die of pestilence, one third would fall by the sword, and one third would be scattered to the wind (Ezek. 5:1-17).

The language in Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah and the book of Revelation has many symbols that conveyed coded or secret meanings. Those who understood the symbols received instruction and encouragement, but to those who did not it was merely a confusing puzzle, until other teaching made it plain. In studying these books it is important to remember that they are highly symbolic and we need to give more diligent study to understand them in the author's intended meaning.

*More effort is required to understand figurative language.* A figure of speech is a word or expression that has a meaning

beyond its usual meaning. When Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19), the Jews took His expression as literally speaking of Herod's temple and responded, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you will raise it up in three days?" (John 2:20). John makes it clear that Jesus meant what He said to be a figurative expression of an actual reality, His resurrection, "But he spoke of the temple of his body" (John 2:21).

Figurative does not mean mythical or untrue. It is not liberal nor unbelieving to understand a figurative statement as having a meaning other than the usual meaning of its words. The believing attitude accepts the author's intended meaning. If he meant an expression to be literal, it must be understood as literal. If it was meant as figurative, it must be understood as figurative.

The Jews who looked for a temporal Messianic ruler rejected Jesus because they did not understand the figurative Messianic prophecies. Nicodemus was wrong when he spoke of the new birth only in a literal sense (John 3:3-5). Liberals are wrong who take the historical account of creation as only symbolic. They are also in error who take the second coming of Jesus as a figurative expression of Christ coming into our lives at baptism.

## GUIDELINES FOR UNDERSTANDING PROPHECY

### BACKGROUND:

1. *The general principles for understanding a passage in the light of its grammatical and historical meaning must be the basis for interpreting prophecy.* Much of prophecy can be understood in the light of the general rules for reading literature. However, special rules apply to the special expressions and constructions. Use the general rules as far as they will take you.

2. *Seek to establish the purpose and nature of the passage.* Is it teaching information or exhorting to action? Is it an historical report of the past, a description of the present conditions at the

time of the prophecy, or a prediction of things to come in the future? Is it poetry, prose, or symbolic vision?

3. *Determine the historical background of the prophet and of the prophecy.* It is difficult to understand the figurative meaning of an expression if we do not understand its literal or ordinary meaning. One needs to understand the use of a thing in the prophet's time, for example, Jeremiah's yoke, Amos' plumbline, and Paul's girdle used by Agabus, in order to learn the meaning intended by the prophet. A knowledge of the history, culture and geography of the time of the prophecy can be helpful in understanding that prophecy. One must not, however, force a prediction to say only what a man would know in the prophet's time or circumstances, thus eliminating the role of divine revelation.

#### INTERPRETATION:

4. *Give attention to the meaning of names of people, events, places and things.* A message is sometimes linked to the meaning of a name. A Bible dictionary can help here but make sure their explanations harmonize with Bible truth. Unfortunately, Bible dictionaries are not always reliable.

5. *First, consider the literal meaning of an expression.* "If the literal sense makes good sense seek no other sense" is one way to remember this guideline. The literal meaning of a word or expression is the usual meaning of that word or expression in a given area of usage.

We must take the passage in the most basic, ordinary meaning unless compelling reasons indicate otherwise. Since much prophecy is figurative we must recognize this possibility. The interpreter who finds more symbolic meanings than the original writer intended is merely an imaginative misinterpreter. Many prophecies were literally fulfilled, for example see page 129.

6. *Determine if the expression is figurative.* The following considerations help the reader recognize figurative language. It is figurative if the speaker or an author of Scripture says it is

figurative (Dan. 7:17; John 2:19). It is figurative when the context states or indicates it is figurative (John 7:39). A figurative meaning is intended when the literal sense involves an impossibility (Mark 10:40) or a contradiction with clear teaching. A figurative meaning may more clearly fit the context and purpose of the author. The figurative meaning is intended in the prediction when the Bible itself claims it is fulfilled in a figurative way (John 2:19-22).

7. *Determine if the prophecy has been fulfilled or not.* Certainty in interpreting predictive prophecy often cannot be attained without the light of its undoubted fulfillment (Amos 9:11,12; Acts 15:13-19). Unfulfilled prophecy is much less certain of meaning and requires more caution in interpreting it.

8. *Determine if the prophecy is conditional or not.* The doom announced by Jonah on Nineveh could be avoided upon condition of their repentance — which they promptly offered, much to Jonah's chagrin. Usually conditional predictions are general promises of blessings or judgment rather than predicting specific events. The context needs to be studied carefully looking for any stated conditions. Study the following passages: Deuteronomy 28; Jeremiah 18:8,10; 26:12,13; Ezekiel 18:30-32; 33:13-15.

#### BIBLICAL ASSISTANCE:

9. *Understand a prophecy in the light of the New Testament explanation of the prophecy.* Of course, the New Testament does not interpret every Old Testament prophecy for us. No prophecy should be understood in a way contrary to the New Testament interpretation of that prophecy. One method that employs this guideline is to read through the New Testament and every time the Old Testament is quoted go back to the text in the Old Testament and study it in the light of the use and explanation given to it in the New Testament.

Matthew said the birth of Jesus to a virgin was a fulfillment of Isaiah's predicted virgin conception and birth (Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:22,23). "The stone which the builders rejected has become the

head of the corner" (Psa. 118:22) was applied by Jesus (Matt. 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:11). See also Acts 4:11; Ephesians 2:20; 1 Peter 2:7. The Lord promised to "make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah (Jer. 31:31). The Hebrews writer quoted Jeremiah 31:31-34 and applied this prophecy directly to the covenant of Christ with all nations (Heb. 8:8-13).

Use the New Testament interpretations of the Old Testament prophecies as a guide and example for methods of interpretation of the passages that are not interpreted in the New Testament. Fulfilled prophecy is the key to understanding unfulfilled prophecy. The study of New Testament handling of prophecies will give more insight into the understanding of all prophecies.

10. *Any explanation by the author or any inspired writer must be accepted as the true interpretation.* Jesus said, "He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.' " The Gospel writer John explained, "Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive" (John 7:38,39).

Because of New Testament explanation we know at least some of the promises to "the seed of Abraham" are not to those who are blood descendants from Abraham but to those believers in the gospel who are children of Abraham by faith. See Galatians 3:26-29; Romans 4:12; Hebrews 2:16. Paul plainly said, "For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, but not all are children of Abraham because they are his descendants; but 'Through Isaac shall your descendants be named.' This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are reckoned as descendants" (Rom. 9:6-8). Believers in Christ have become "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16). We best understand what God predicted in the Old Testament about his new people, new covenant, and new kingdom when we study the New Testament explanation of these promises.

11. *Parallel prophecies or other prophecies on the same sub-*

*ject may explain an expression.* "The desolating sacrilege spoken of by the prophet Daniel" (Matt. 24:15) is explained in Luke's account. "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near" (Luke 21:20).

God intended to create a new people by giving them His Spirit. The following scriptures help one to understand this topic: Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:25-27; 37:14,26-28; Luke 24:49; John 3:3-5; Acts 1:3-5,8; 2:4,38; Titus 2:11-14; 3:3-7; Heb. 2:1-4; 8:8-13.

Consider other passages which use the same or similar wording or imagery. One must realize at the same time that the same symbol or figure may be used in quite different ways at different times.

#### CAUTIONS:

12. *Hold interpretations of prophecy with humility, not dogmatism, especially those unfulfilled or uncertain.* Remember the Jewish interpreters of Jesus' day were sure they were right in their understanding of Messianic prophecy — but they were wrong. We must study diligently and form honest opinions but we must not consider such views as infallible.

Concerning the date of the second coming, we cannot be more certain than our Lord, who said, "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only" (Matt. 24:36). When Daniel asked for an explanation of his vision of the beasts he was told they represented four kings or kingdoms (Dan. 7:15-23). But he was not given detailed information about these kingdoms. Even the prophets themselves could not interpret unfulfilled prophecy with certainty (Matt. 22:2,3; I Pet. 1:10-12).

Those who have dogmatically detailed future events have brought disrepute on the faith when such strongly held views have been proven false. Agreement on the exact fulfillment of unfulfilled prophecy must not be made a test of fellowship.

13. *Beware of arbitrary systems of prophetic interpretation of*

*future events.* They often force a meaning on texts that violates the context. Prophecies were often given without any system, chronological or otherwise. Different aspects of the same event are foretold by various prophets. Predictions of widely separated events may be stated together and appear to be scheduled to occur more closely together than they actually will be when fulfilled (Matt. 16:27,28). It may be that no current system of interpreting prophecy is right in every detail. What is important is that we believe every word spoken by the Lord and that we walk in trust obeying what He has asked of us.

14. *Concentrate on the central truths and important lessons from Scripture.* We need to learn to be faithful unto death (Rev. 2:10), to be confident that God is supreme in the universe (Rev. 4 and 5), and to be overcomers who will be victorious (Rev. 17:14), more than we need to know the exact meaning of the symbolic 666 (Rev. 13:18).

Learning from Bible prophecy is not always easy. But, because learning from Bible prophecy will strengthen our faith, deepen our understanding and encourage a warmhearted and spiritual devotion to our God, we neglect it to our own loss (II Pet. 3:1-18).

### **Study Questions**

1. Why do some avoid studying prophecy?
2. Define a true prophet according to the Bible.
3. State four benefits of studying prophecy.
4. What inadequate approaches to the study of prophecy must be avoided?
5. What method of study is recommended in this chapter?

6. List problems that one encounters in studying Bible prophecy.
7. Give examples of figurative and symbolic language used in Bible prophecy.
8. Define symbol and type. How are they different?
9. Define the meaning of a figure of speech.
10. List fourteen guidelines for understanding prophecy.
11. How can one determine when an expression is to be understood figuratively?
12. What should be one's attitude toward his view of the meaning of unfulfilled prophecy?

### **Project**

Read the Old Testament Messianic prediction and the New Testament fulfillment. Identify what is fulfilled literally and what is fulfilled figuratively.

O.T.	N.T.	LITERAL	FIGURATIVE
1. Isa. 7:14	Matt. 1:23		
2. Micah 5:2	Matt. 2:6		
3. Mal. 3:1	Matt. 11:10		
4. Isa. 42:3	Matt. 12:20		



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5. Zech. 11:12    Matt. 27:9
6. Psa. 22:18    Matt. 27:43
7. Isa. 42:6;  
    49:6        Luke 2:32
8. Psa. 118:22    Luke 20:17
9. Psa. 41:9       John 13:18
10. Psa. 16:10    Acts 2:27