

4) Prophecy

If there's one area of Scripture that we could say is the "most" challenging for us, it is biblical prophecy. Because of this we'll take our time!

1. Introductory Matters

A. The importance of biblical prophecy

Many – if not most! – Christians consider prophecy as something that you only study if you've already mastered everything else. They are viewed as not required, unessential, and "not practical." Nothing could be further from the truth! Studying biblical prophecy is necessary for

- 1) Comfort, 1 Thess 4:18
- 2) Perseverance, 1 Cor 15:52–58; 2 Cor 5:10
- 3) Sanctification, 1 John 3:3
- 4) Stability, 2 Thess 2:2
- 5) Service, 1 Tim 6:13–14; 2 Tim 3:16–17

Too often statements are made similar to that of C. H. Spurgeon—" I would rather be the means of saving a soul from death than be the greatest orator on earth...than I would be made Archbishop of Canterbury...than explain all mysteries...than to be crowned in the arena of theological controversy as *Dr. Sufficientissimus*...than to have solved the problems of the religious Sphinx, or to have cut the Gordian knot of Apocalyptic difficulty" (*Autobiography*, 1:197).

This introduces a false contradiction—that somehow being a soul-winner and being committed to a ministry of the whole counsel of God are opposed to each other. Prophecy is found all throughout Scripture, and "all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16–17).

Furthermore, focusing on "just" the gospel and rudimentary aspects of Christian living is out of synch with the NT pattern of fulfilling the Great Commission. The historical record of Acts and apostolic teaching in the epistles (of which Revelation is included) inform Christians concerning the position and future of *the church* (the body of Christ) in relation to *Israel*. Such teaching was part and parcel of establishing churches in the whole counsel of God so they would be equipped to minister, grow in maturity and Christ-likeness, be protected from false doctrine, and grow in love as a body (Eph 4:12–16; cf. 1 Thess 1:9; 2 Thess 2:5; Titus 2:11–14).

B. Understand that prophecy was given during specific times in history for definite purposes

- 1) Writing Prophets *Before* the Exile – Called Pre-Exilic Prophets
 - a. Isaiah

In anticipation of Israel's destruction and captivity, Isaiah *foretold* not only the judgment the nation would endure (1–10) but also judgment against its pagan neighbors (13–23, 34), the establishment of the Davidic king and his kingdom (11, 35), and the future deliverance and restoration of Israel, the future glory of Zion, and the world-wide rule of the Messiah (40–66). Such prophecies aimed at encouraging Israel to repent and be faithful to the Lord.

b. Jeremiah

The “weeping prophet” (4:19; 9:1; 10:19–20; 13:17; 23:9) wrote primarily of the judgment Israel was about to face, but like Isaiah he foretold of judgment against the nations (46–51), the judgment against Babylon (25), restoration of Israel (30), and the new covenant God would make “with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” (31:31ff).

c. Hosea and Amos

Both of these prophets write primarily of the judgment Israel would soon face. Both also relate prophecies of Israel's future blessing (Hos 14), the revival of the Davidic kingdom (Amos 9:11–12), and the restoration of Israel to an Edenic promised land (Amos 9:13–15).

2) Writing Prophets During and After the Exile – Called Exilic and Post-Exilic Prophets

a. Ezekiel

Ezekiel spoke of the judgment and destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (1–24), judgment against the nations (25–32), but he also prophesied the restoration of the nation (37, the vision of the valley of dry bones) and in detail the future millennial temple (40–48). Israel, Jerusalem, and the temple have been judged and destroyed, but they *will* be restored to even greater glory!

b. Daniel – Daniel's prophecy of the seventy weeks (9:24–27) will be considered later.

c. Obadiah

Obadiah foretold a day of worldwide judgment (the “day of the Lord,” 15) that all nations would face but Israel would escape (17) and ultimately be victorious (18–21).

d. Zechariah

Zechariah's prophecy contains glorious prophecies of Israel's restoration to God's favor (8:1–17), joy and favor in the future kingdom (8:18–23), the advent and rejection of the Messiah (9–11), and the advent and reception of the Messiah (12–14).

3) What the NT Epistles written during the Church Age say about Christ's Return

Christ's return is to be eagerly anticipated (1 Cor 1:4–8), helps guard against hasty judgment (4:5), is proclaimed every time the Lord's Supper is observed (11:26), anticipates the resurrection of the saints (15:23), gives encouragement in death (15:51–57), is an impetus for purity (Phil 1:9–10), encourages gentleness (4:5), motivates us to consider fleshly lusts as dead (Col 3:3–5), is *the* principle event for which the believer waits (1 Thess 1:9–10), encourages brotherly love (3:12–13), is *the* source of consolation to those who sorrow over the dead who sleep in Jesus (4:13–18), calls us to be alert and self-controlled (5:2–6), to be faithful and obedient (1 Tim 6:13–14), to faithfully preach the Word (2 Tim 4:1–2), is to be loved (4:7–8), promotes endurance and perseverance (Heb 10:36–37; James 5:7–8), enables endurance in severe trials (1 Pet 1:7) and persecution (4:13), encourages holy living (1 John 3:2–3), faithfulness (Rev 2:25; 3:11), and watchfulness (Rev 16:15)

2. Special Rules for Interpreting Prophecy

A. Follow the **Normal** or **Plain** Sense Meaning of a Passage

Follow the normal rules of how words function (see pp. 33–34). Note that “Israel” always refers to the *people* and *nation*. These factors do not change from the OT to the NT—Israel always means Israel, the people/nation (cf. 1 Cor 10:32).

B. Understand the Historical–Cultural Situation

Historical situations many times give rise to the prophecies. Geography is important. For example, the rebuilding of the Second Temple by Zerubbabel gives rise to Haggai's prophecies of the Millennial Temple (Haggai 2:6ff).

C. Discern any **Figures** of Speech

Normal interpretation takes note of figurative language and gives it a normal understanding. The principles for handling figurative language apply here (see pp. 38–40). Cf. Isa 35:1–2.

D. Note the **Context**

The context will usually indicate if the fulfillment will be in the end times or in the relatively near future from the perspective of the author. Certain expressions are helpful in this—“Day of the Lord,” “in that day,” “the latter days,” the “time of the end,” etc (cf. Joel 2:1–2).

E. Recognize that Prophecy Focuses Primarily on the **Messiah** and the Establishing of His **Kingdom** Based in Jerusalem

- 1) This relates to what we studied on pp. 22–23, the unifying purpose in history. God will glorify Himself in human history in **the Kingdom of God—God will lovingly rule and dwell with His people on earth forever**. This is the unifying center, the ultimate purpose/goal of God's activity. This is the goal of human history, what everything is working towards.

- 2) OT prophecy clearly foretold of Christ's coming to earth, His rejection, and the establishment of His Kingdom. However, the OT prophets did *not* see any "gap" of time between Christ's coming and the establishment of His Kingdom (cf. Isa 61:1–2; Luke 4:16–21).
- 3) Prophecy clearly anticipates Christ coming to and reigning on earth.

F. Since Every *Fulfilled* Prophecy was Literally Fulfilled **Expect the Same of *Unfulfilled* Prophecies**

- 1) Israel returned from Babylon by Cyrus's command (Isa 44:28; 45:1)
- 2) Christ was born in Bethlehem (Mic 5:2)
- 3) Christ entered Jerusalem on a donkey (Zech 9:9)

3. Understand God's Covenants and Promises

A covenant is a relationship of responsibility. The three major covenants in the Bible are the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenants. These covenants—especially the Abrahamic—provide the key to understanding Hebrew history and prophecy. If we make a mistake in interpreting them or understanding them, how we interpret and understand all of biblical prophecy will be muddled.

A. Abrahamic Covenant, Genesis 12, 15

Abram of Ur came from a long and illustrious line of idolaters (Josh 24:2). God in his grace saved him, and entered into an **unconditional** covenant with him. God promised three things to Abram:

- 1) **Land**, Gen 12:1
- 2) **Seed**, Gen 12:2; 15:5
- 3) **Blessing**, Gen 12:3

B. Davidic Covenant, 2 Samuel 7

Abraham's descendants eventually grew in number, sojourned in Egypt, were delivered from slavery and established in the Promised Land, were ruled over by a succession of judges, by Saul, and then by his successor David. David conquered many national enemies, brought the ark to Jerusalem, and determined to build a temple for the Lord.

The Davidic Covenant is important as it *specifies* the promised seed of the Abrahamic Covenant. Jacob had limited it to the tribe of Judah (Gen 49:10). God's **unconditional** covenant with David narrows it down to his line. God promised three things to David:

- 1) An Everlasting **Dynasty**, 2 Sam 7:16—"your house"

A “house” is a posterity, a royal family—physical descendants. This means that **David’s descendants will not be annihilated or replaced by another royal family in Israel.** This is ultimately fulfilled in Christ (Rom 1:3)

- 2) An Everlasting **Kingdom**, 7:16—“your kingdom”

This is a **political kingdom** in which **the seed of David will rule**, ultimately fulfilled in the Kingdom of God, the millennial rule of Christ on David’s throne (Luke 1:33)

- 3) An Everlasting **Throne**, 7:16—“your throne”

This refers to **the dignity and power of the throne**, the **right to rule** or the **legal title of rulership** in the Kingdom.

Of this Davidic covenant, yet to be fulfilled are:

- Israel existing forever in the land of Israel as a nation, a political entity
- The Messiah ruling over Israel from Jerusalem
- The Messiah possessing all the dignity and power such rule would entail

C. New Covenant, Jeremiah 31

The new covenant is an **unconditional** covenant God promised to Israel, guaranteeing spiritual life and the forgiveness of sins so they would dwell obediently in the land.

The main contrast between the old covenant (i.e. the Mosaic Law) and the new covenant is forgiveness of sin, priesthood, and ability to obey. God promised the following in the new covenant:

- 1) Regeneration and indwelling of the Holy Spirit, Jer 31:33
- 2) Universal knowledge of God, 31:34

This refers to spiritual covenant knowledge, a correct and personal knowledge of God (Hos 4:6) that results in a desire and capacity for obedience (Jer 31:33).

- 3) Forgiveness and final expiation of sin, 31:34

There was forgiveness under the old covenant (Lev 4:31, 35; Psa 32:5); there was a ‘practical’ expiation of sin under the old covenant (Psa 103:12); they were saved “on credit” (cf. Rom 3:25–26). There is finality through the new covenant (Heb 9:14, 26, 28; 10:12, 14).

- 4) An unbreakable relationship between Israel and the Lord, 31:33–34

This is associated with the nation’s re-gathering and restoration to the promised land (Jer 31:27–29)