

# 15. PROPHECY

## DOCTRINAL STATEMENT

Biblical prophecy is a historical and contemporary vehicle by which God demonstrates His power over the events of human history. The primary function of predictive prophecy is to show the sequence of events culminating in the return of Jesus Christ and the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. The process by which this comes about is outlined in many passages of the Old and New Testaments.

## DOCTRINAL OVERVIEW

Central to the understanding of biblical prophecy is the recognition that God is Governor and Supreme Ruler, not only of the nations on earth, but of the times and seasons as well. God portrays Himself as the real author of human experience, the one who has formulated a master plan that shall culminate in the establishment of His government on earth and with the vast majority of mankind qualifying to participate in it as spirit-born sons of God.

One aspect of prophecy is that it proves God's existence. No man or other mortal could predict the future and then bring it to pass (Isaiah 41:22 ff). But one need not wait until the future to prove God's existence through prophecy. He can look as well to the many Old Testament prophecies telling of Christ's first coming—prophecies that have already been completely fulfilled in their letter and intent. Looking further, the numerous biblical prophecies pointing toward Jesus Christ's return to earth as King of kings and Lord of lords are so powerful and so specific that they shall forever eliminate agnosticism and skepticism, once they have been fulfilled.

Prophecy is history written in advance. It is in keeping with the principle, "Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but He revealeth His secret unto His servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7). Thus God has not left man totally in the dark about the general course of future world events.

The term "prophecy" is most often used today to mean "prediction of the future." The original prophets of ancient Israel had a role somewhat different from this. They did predict what would happen in the future, but this was usually in the context of the sins of the nation and the penalties their country would reap if their people did not turn from their evil ways. Sometimes fairly specific sequences of future events were laid down. Normally, however, prophecy was rather general, outlining where the people had gone wrong and what would happen if they did not repent. At various times prophecies or oracles were pronounced against some of Israel's neighbors such as Assyria and Babylon. Prophecy and its spokesmen (prophets) have played a significant role from virtually the beginning of man's existence (Luke 1:70; Acts 3:21). This role has not been solely to declare futuristic developments but to affect the behavior of individuals and nations in respect to divine laws and God's master plan.

This relationship between prophecy and morality is clearly and consistently interwoven throughout the old and New Testaments. As a matter of biblical fact, Jeremiah records this relationship as affecting the future of every nation on earth (Jer. 18:7-10).

The vast spectrum of biblical prophecy is varied in form. Some prophecies were written down as a result of dreams or visions, others by direct communication with heavenly beings. The prophetic words are at times clear and to the point; in other instances the statements are vague and ambiguous.

There are several principles and keys (such as symbolism and duality) that govern the right understanding of prophecy. These must be used consistently with the right methods and proper understanding of the background to arrive at the sought-for answers.

A *symbol* is something used to represent something else. An example of symbolism in the Bible is the use of the word "mountain" to mean large nation (Mic. 4:14). The Bible in general interprets its own symbols—although many times in verses somewhat removed from the symbolic statement. *Duality* is the term used when a prophecy has more than one fulfillment. An example of a dual prophecy would be Matthew 24:12-20, which describes both the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and events to occur just before the return of Jesus Christ. (The terms "type" and "antitype" can also be used to describe the original reality and the later understanding of biblical events, ceremonies, persons, or the like.)

The breadth and scope of prophecy has ranged from individuals to nations to the entire earth and beyond. In some cases it is evident that prophecies were announced and fulfilled and no longer have relevance in our day except as examples and lessons. But most major prophecies are yet to be fulfilled. And there is no doubt that this major part is focused on the return of Jesus Christ. It is the one major thread that binds Old and New Testament prophecy together.

In the same way that the prophetic Kingdom of God is the focal point of the gospel, so also is Christ Himself the focal point of all prophecy throughout the Bible in both testaments. The Old Testament is the story of Christ's genealogy, and the prophecies of His first and second comings. Indeed the whole thrust of the Old Testament—including the Levitical sacrificial system which included many symbolic acts typifying Christ and His sacrifice to pay the penalty for humanity's sins. The New Testament is the story of His life and teachings and the detailed prophecies of His coming Kingdom.

No prophecy is an end to itself. Any prophecy only has lasting importance in the final analysis, because it adds to our knowledge of Christ, His family, His way of life, His return, His coming Kingdom, and the circumstances leading up to and surrounding the setting up of that Kingdom. If one forgets this simple truth, he may find himself wandering from obscure prophecy to obscure prophecy, restricted to learning about relatively unimportant technicalities while missing the overall thrust and importance of the basic prophecies of Christ's second coming.

It is paradoxical that often the more uncertain points of prophecy tend to receive the most attention. It sometimes seems that these hard-to-decipher prophecies attract interest in direct proportion to how *little* about them is overtly stated in the Bible. There is nothing wrong with the study of obscure prophecies—indeed, it is quite understandable—so long as the relative importance of prophecies is kept clear, and the prophecies about Jesus Christ are kept clearest. God designed the human mind to enjoy the intellectual "high" which the probing of prophetic secrets affords. "It is the glory of God to conceal things: but the glory of kings to search things out" (Prov. 25:2).

But there is a definite reason why God inspired the clear and obvious prophecies of the Bible to be clear and obvious. He wanted no one to miss the primary point of all prophecy: that Jesus Christ is to return and set up His Kingdom on earth. For one properly to understand prophecy, he must realize that all future prophecies must relate to Christ and His Kingdom, and that for any specific prophecy to be properly understood, it must be seen against the context of Christ's second coming.

Most of the prophecies of the Bible focus on the "end time" (either primarily or dualistically), a time period of colossal, momentous worldwide problems culminating in total human destruction if Christ would not intervene to stop it. This present age is the best candidate for the "time of the end" that history has ever seen. No other previous time has paralleled the present capacity for man to wipe all human life from the earth. The multiple possible methods of human self-annihilation now extant—whether quickly through nuclear, chemical or biological warfare, or more slowly through famine, pollution or disease—fit the biblical pattern. Certainly, the

key scripture of Matthew 24:22, "no human being would be saved" (RSV); "not a mortal could survive" (*Berkeley*); "not a soul would be saved alive" (*Moffatt*) could only be literally possible in the age of thermonuclear overkill and global megaproblems.

The commission to the Church of God is to preach the gospel of the coming Kingdom of God to all nations (Matthew 24:14). In addition to the message of Christ's death, forgiveness and salvation, the message Christ preached is both a warning and a witness—a *warning* about mankind's plunge toward annihilation and a *witness* about what God will do to stop it. This message is a *prophetic announcement* of Christ's second coming and the government He will set up at His return, and it is indeed the primary reason for the Church's existence at this time.

As stated, the focal point of all but a few specific historical prophecies is the "end time," culminating in the return of Jesus Christ. In a number of instances the end time is specifically tied into historical prophecies which have already been fulfilled in a certain degree or type, for example, the long and intricate prophecy of Daniel 11 and 12 leaves known past history at a certain point and definitely envisions the resurrection and the establishment of the Kingdom of God. Similarly, Matthew 24 describes the fall of Jerusalem in a way which did not differ from its fall in A.D. 70, yet these scriptures also project forward to the "consummation of the age."

Thus there is often a *duality* in prophecy. Events of past history will be paralleled by events immediately preceding the time of the end. Yet the general outline of end time events is repeated from prophecy to prophecy with little deviation in basic structure. These may be summarized as follows:

Immediately preceding the intervention of Jesus Christ is a time of unprecedented worldwide trouble. This is expressed in various ways by language which is both literal and metaphorical. However, a consistent theme is "a time such as never has been nor ever shall be," a time when "no flesh shall be saved" from destruction if God did not put a stop to the calamitous course of human events.

A specific sequence of tumultuous geopolitical developments shall focus on the Middle East, and Jerusalem shall be the central spot in and around which these major prophetic events shall take place. The major and minor prophetic books are replete with descriptions about, and admonitions to, Jerusalem in the end time. Great international contention is seen brewing over Jerusalem, which shall move the city even further onto the center stage, as world events rush toward their climax. Indeed two of the key signs that Christ gave to His disciples was that the fulfillment of all biblical prophecy and the subsequent establishment of the Kingdom of God would be at hand "when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies" (Luke 21:20) and when you "shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place" (Matthew 24:15; Mark 13:14). Furthermore, the two witnesses of Revelation 11, who shall preach and prophesy against the entire earth, shall apparently center their activities near the site of the temple in Jerusalem.

God said He would make Jerusalem "a burdensome stone for all people: all that burden themselves with it shall be cut in pieces, though all the people of the earth be gathered together against it" (Zech. 12:3). Though treacherous times are yet ahead for Jerusalem (e.g., Zech. 14:2), God states that He shall go forth into battle against, and shall utterly destroy, all those nations that shall have gathered against Jerusalem (ch. 14:3, 12; 12:9), "and the Lord also shall save the tents of Judah first" (Zech. 12:7) when Jesus Christ returns. In these incredible (and forthcoming) days, God shall greatly strengthen the inhabitants of Jerusalem (Zech. 12:8); He shall pour out His spirit of grace and supplication on them (v. 10); He shall change the geography of the city when Christ's feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives (Zech. 14:4), and when living waters shall flow forth from Jerusalem nourishing the whole earth (Zech. 14:8). "In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you" (Zech. 8:23). "Strong nations shall come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem and pray before the Lord" (Zech. 8:22), "and Jerusalem shall be called a city of truth; and the mountain of the Lord of hosts the holy mountain" (Zech. 8:3). (Much uncertainty remains, however, even about that which seems sure, as there is difficulty determining the precise time frame of many verses. Zephaniah 2:7, for example, has been applied to both the modern state of

Israel in the Middle East and to the future millennial state: "And the coast shall be for the remnant of the house of Judah; they shall feed thereupon: ... for the Lord their God shall visit them, and turn away their captivity.")

A pivotal set of verses regarding the crucial geopolitical sequence of events in the Middle East is Daniel 11:40 ff. These verses describe a "king of the north" who, in response to being "pushed at" by the "king of the south" shall come against the king of the south "like a whirlwind, with chariots, and with horsemen, and with many ships; and he shall enter into the countries, and shall overflow and pass over." Verse 41 goes on to add that "He [the king of the north] shall enter also into the glorious land [holy land], and many countries shall be overthrown." The specific delineation of nations—the Holy Land, Egypt, Edom, Moab, Ammon, Libya, Ethiopia—leads to fascinating speculations as one watches the international scene.

Daniel 2, together with Revelation 13 and 17, expands our understanding of this "king of the north." This kingdom shall be a composite or union of "ten kings" (states or groups of states), which shall constitute a resurrection of the Roman Empire in an economic, political, military and religious confederation that shall figure prominently in the various end time prophetic geopolitical encounters.

It is clear that the political union of Revelation 13 and 17 is described in terms which people of the first century Mediterranean world would have recognized. Readers would have seen a scantily veiled representation of the Roman Empire with its military might, its political intrigues and its rule over much of the known world. Indeed, the harlot of chapter 17 is called "the great city which has dominion over the kings of the earth" (v. 18), a reference which many would have immediately taken as meaning Rome itself.

This illustrates that prophecy is often given in symbols which would have been directly meaningful to the time and situation in which the prophecy was originally given. This makes the interpretation of prophecy that much more easy and difficult at the same time. The end time "Babylon" or "Roman Empire" will certainly have characteristics in common with its ancient counterpart. On the other hand, it will also have differences which prevent an exact correspondence with the historical "type" or symbol. Thus, while one may look at the contemporary scene and make identifications which seem plausible, there is no guarantee that one's speculations are perfectly on target. After all, many of the "prophecy charts," time schemes, reconstructions and the like of the past two millennia have been internally consistent and externally cogent. There was only one real flaw: they were wrong. So, the only worthwhile test of any prophetic presentation is ultimately quite obvious—will it, or will it not, actually occur in reality?

Whatever the prophetic specifics in fact turn out to be, the outlines are now surely clear: There shall be swirling currents of international alliances and confederations vying for world power through economic, political, military and religious control; and the focus of their attention shall be the Middle East in general and Jerusalem in particular.

As the intertwined tangle of world events hurtle toward their awesome conclusion, a complex series of seals, woes, trumpet blasts and plagues are unveiled with ever-increasing regularity, tension and fury. (The book of Revelation describes these futuristic events in first century language.) At the climax of everything, with mankind literally on the brink of total self-annihilation, Jesus Christ shall return to the earth, accompanied by a spectacular series of heavenly signs (Joel 2:31; Matthew 24:29-31; Rev. 12-17). At His return, the dead in Christ shall be resurrected, and the elect still living shall be changed to spirit to rule with Christ.

"For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:15-17).

This shall be the most majestic moment in universal history, the focal point of the Bible, the time to which prophecy has primarily projected.

"When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor.15:54-57).

Christ and the saints shall be opposed initially by a system called "Babylon," and leaders referred to as "the Beast" and the "antichrist." These shall all have characteristics of persons and institutions of past history, even though they shall have a unique existence at the end time. They shall be destroyed and Satan, who has incited the rebellion against Christ, shall be cast into a place of spiritual restraint (Rev. 20:1-3).

Then begins the millennial rule of Christ and the saints over the earth. After some continuing confrontations and battles (described in Ezek. 38 and 39), God's Kingdom shall be set up over all peoples; and Jesus Christ shall teach them God's laws, the way of happiness and eventually of eternal salvation. This 1,000-year period shall be followed by the Great White Throne Judgment and finally the new heaven and the new earth, both of which are descriptively hazy, as the Bible does not reveal much information about either.

Whenever God has chosen to intervene in human history, major current events were always involved: the course of nations, the role of governments, the fate of kings, and the destinies of peoples. God's direct interaction with, and control over, the kings and governments of Babylon and Persia (Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus) are two prominent Old Testament cases where the nations so involved were the world rulers at the time. The prophecies against Egypt and Assyria are two other examples.

We know of at least one biblical prophecy that "failed" not because God erred, but because the people fully responded *en masse* to God's warning and unitedly repented. Jonah was sent to Nineveh to predict its fall in forty days. This was a prophecy of God; it did not take place. This example illustrates the fact that much *specific* prophecy is contingent upon the actions of the parties involved (Ezek. 33:7-16). The implications for today are obvious; the responsibilities of God's "watchmen" are enormous.

Bible prophecy has a continuing and critical relevance to the course of modern nations and to the destinies of contemporary peoples. The identity of certain 20th century nations in terms of their ancient names is important in the understanding of current and future events. Some nations such as Egypt retain their exact original names. Other names, though somewhat changed, are easily traceable; for example, Judah (or the House of Judah) represents the Jewish people in the modern state of Israel, and Moab and Ammon would seem to represent the Arab peoples in the modern area of Jordan.

The modern identification of the "House of Israel" as the United States and British Commonwealth is an important part of the Church's prophetic understanding. While the United States is said to be specifically represented as "Manasseh" and the British Commonwealth as "Ephraim," the identity of the remainder of the original Israelite tribes is uncertain (though some evaluations have been made, such as equating France with Reuben.) The identification of the United States and British Commonwealth as the House of Israel leads to serious and momentous prophetic implications for the future. The time of the end is also called "the time of Jacob's trouble" (Jer. 30:7), because the modern descendants of the House of Israel shall be taken captive by "strangers" and severely oppressed. It shall take the return of Jesus Christ to free modern descendants of the patriarch Jacob, from national humiliation and restore them to the knowledge of God. This event shall be of such enormous magnitude that Israel's original exodus from Egypt shall be forgotten by comparison (Jer. 23:7-8).

God has given us a general overview of the Church itself in prophecy, with its main commission being to prepare the way for Christ's return by preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God to the world as a witness (Matthew 24:14). The admonition to the "watchman" of Ezekiel 33 applies as well:

"...if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are not warned, and the sword comes, and takes any one of them; that man is taken away in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at the watchman's hand" (Ezek. 33:6).

Although enormous numbers of incredibly detailed prophetic schemes have been deduced from the Bible, the success record of correctly predicting future events and dates has been rather meager. Hindsight has always been more successful than foresight in determining the reality of prophecy. Certainly the injunction to "watch at all times" (Luke 21:36) must be heeded, but the Bible does not give any major examples of people acquiring specific predictive knowledge of the future from the written prophecies alone. Yet, as mankind's history approaches "the time of the end," a generation when "many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased," prophecy in general and the book of Daniel in particular shall become progressively more understandable (Dan. 12:4).

Shall there come a time when God will directly inspire some of His servants to literally prophesy about imminent world events? Biblical indications and precedents would suggest so. Joel 2:28, "I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions"—was applied by Peter on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. But the context of Joel 2 is clearly just "before the great and terrible day of the Lord" (v. 30-31), indicating that the primary fulfillment of Joel 2:28 is yet ahead.

What is abundantly clear from the Bible is that the absolute fact of the return of Jesus Christ to this earth to set up the world-ruling government of God shall be in a time of great human turmoil and disaster. Also emphasized in the Bible is the sequence of events immediately surrounding Christ's return (primarily before, but after as well), not the long history of centuries between New Testament times and the end time.

But nowhere does the Bible encourage speculation to the point of predicting specific dates when a prophecy is to be fulfilled, and then predicating one's life around what is supposed to happen on or by such a date. To the contrary, we are told, "But of that day and hour no one knows" (Matthew 24:36). We are admonished that "the faithful and wise servant" shall be aggressively and persistently doing God's work at the return of Christ, and shall not have shrunk back from life's responsibilities because of his (real or imagined) interpretations of prophecy (Matthew 24:36 ff).

Though prophecy has always been intriguing and exciting to human beings who have constantly sought to know the future, Paul's strong admonition is that "if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, but have not *love*, I am nothing" (1 Cor.13:2). Love, then, is the essential characteristic of the Christian—It is the clearest stamp of God's Spirit in action. Interestingly enough, Paul continues his contrast of love and prophecy in this chapter. "Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away (fail, KJV) ....For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away" (1 Cor.13:8-10).

The study of prophecy can be an interesting and rewarding experience. It is indeed placed in scripture to be analyzed and appreciated in a Christian's relationship to God. However, it is yet unfolding and we must be careful to let events in the real world guide our understanding of the times and seasons, rather than leaping ahead with speculations not grounded on events. As we draw nearer to the climax of mankind's civilization, we will see the convergence of major prophetic developments. They shall no doubt take sharper focus and point us more precisely to the surest and most important prophecy of all—the return of Jesus Christ.

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This publication is intended to be used as a personal study tool. Please know it is not wise to take any man's word for anything, so prove all things for yourself from the pages of your own Bible.

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