

# HOW TO INTERPRET PROPHECY

## INTRODUCTION

The Bible communicates to us with a wide assortment of styles and methods, including prophecy.

In order to understand prophecy, Bible students must use the actual prophetic language only in the way it was meant to be used. II Timothy 2:15 commands us to use the Bible—CORRECTLY! “Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”

God really does want us to understand and profit from all of the parts of the Bible, including the difficult parts. So let us understand prophecy by using the things that the Bible gives us as tools, keys, and pointers in the way that they were meant to be used.

The Book of Revelation is usually thought of as being difficult to interpret—and it is. However, that is not the same as saying that it is impossible. So, at the very outset, the Apostle John makes the following statement:

“Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near” (Revelation 1:3; NKJB).

This lesson will cover seven points that will give us the basic information that we need in order to begin to learn how to interpret and use prophecy. These seven points will be in the form of questions and answers.

## DISCUSSION

### I. WHAT IS PROPHECY?

The element of prophecy that we are studying in this lectureship has to do with two parts: prediction and fulfillment. This is only a part of the whole subject of prophets and prophecy.

To illustrate the simplicity and power of prediction and fulfillment, let us note one of the most simple cases in the Bible:

1. Prediction (Daniel 5:25-29): The meaning of the handwriting on the wall at the evil feast of Belshazzar is given by God’s prophet, Daniel.

2. Fulfillment (Daniel 5:30,31): In that very night Darius the Mede brought down the kingdom of Belshazzar and fulfilled the word of God.

The only possibility that a prophecy from God might not come to pass is if the prophecy is conditional (see Deuteronomy 28).

## II. WHAT PURPOSES DOES PROPHECY HAVE?

We will note two purposes of prophecy in answer to this question.

First, prophecy provides evidence to support truth. For example, the prophecy made by Isaiah about the life and times of Cyrus the Great (Isaiah 44:28-45:7) provided evidence that God is God and that there is no other God!

“I am the Lord, and there is no other;

There is no God besides me.

I will gird you, though you have not known me,

That they may know from the rising of the sun to its setting

That there is none besides me”

(45:5,6; NKJB)

Second, prophecy provides practical help for daily life. This is the claim John made in Revelation 1:3. If people would properly use his prophecy, it would truly help them to live the risen life!

## III. WHAT IS THE SOURCE OF PROPHECY?

Their messages were inspired of God. “Thus saith the Lord” is the formula used hundreds of times to claim that the message was from God. Testing these claims shows them to be true or false (Deuteronomy 18:15-22).

The fact of their inspiration is affirmed by God Himself in Isaiah 42:9: “Behold, the former things are come to pass, and new things do I declare: before they spring forth I tell you of them.” Indeed, it was God Who gave them their words!

The inspiration of the Old Testament is also affirmed by Peter in II Peter 1:21: “For the prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit” (NKJB).

## IV. WHAT IS THE FOUNDATION OF PROPHECY?

First, the EXISTENCE OF GOD serves as part of the foundation. If the One True God does not exist—PROPHECY IS IMPOSSIBLE! But since we can know that prophecy (including prediction and fulfillment) does exist—then we can know that the One True God does exist!

**Second, GOD’S DESIRE TO REVEAL HIS TRUTH to us serves as a foundation of prophecy. He has chosen to reveal truth by various methods, including prophecy.**

**He repeatedly has said that He wants this truth revealed—made available—to all people of all time. We should never underestimate how important this point is: God really wants us to know His will!**

**Third, the fact that God created us in such a way as to be ABLE TO UNDERSTAND His will serves as part of the foundation of prophecy (John 8:32; Ephesians 3:3-5).**

**All three of these foundation points are demonstrably true—and all three have been attacked since the beginning of time.**

## **V. HOW DID IT COME?**

**“God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son” (Hebrews 1:1,2a).**

**A variety of forms were used in predicting future events by God throughout the ages. We will briefly note some in order to illustrate the point and in order to help us to recognize these forms when we come to them in the Bible.**

**A. Prophecy: The prediction of all kinds of events involving many kinds of people and places.**

**B. Apocalyptic: this is the Greek word for “revelation” in Revelation 1:1 (apocalypse). It means “to unveil.” Apocalyptic literature is full of symbols and images that are used to represent other things. Some of the symbolic elements of an apocalypse might even refer to things that were already happening, but they could not be understood apart from the “unveiling” that was made possible by the Holy Spirit (during the age of inspiration and other miracles) and is now possible by “rightly dividing the word” (II Timothy 2:15).**

**C. Figurative: Other forms of figurative language (such as metaphors, similes, parables, allegories, etc.) are often used in the scriptures, and can be associated with prophecies.**

**D. Literal: Prophecies referring to the fall of rulers and nations, to the life and work of people (such as Jesus), or the fall of Jerusalem, and many others, are often presented in straight-forward, everyday literal language.**

**E. Dreams: Dreams by good or evil people were often used by God to predict events (such as in the lives of Joseph and Daniel).**

**F. Visions: Daniel received information about the future in “night visions.”**

**G. Theophanies:** At times, God used various means to “appear” (in such a way as to allow the one who saw to remain living). Examples of this are Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1.

**H. Types and antitypes:** Paul refers to this method in I Corinthians 10 as a way used by God to exhort people to look forward to the Christ (the antitype).

## **VI. WHAT IS ITS CONTENT?**

**Five examples of the content of prophecy are as follows:**

**First, prophecy contains truth.** A case in point is the first time that Jesus predicted His death, burial, and resurrection (John 2:18-22). When this series of events came to pass, His disciples remembered that He had made such a prophecy.

**Second, prophecy contains actual predictions.** A case in point is the prediction of Micah that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). In Matthew 2:5,6, this prophecy was properly used to answer the question regarding where the Messiah was to be born.

**Third, prophecy often contains warnings.** A case in point is the series of warnings given to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 28 with reference to what God would do to them if they did not obey Him. The warnings came to pass without the slightest failure when Israel and Judah fell from grace later on.

**Fourth, prophecy regularly referred to Jesus Christ.** Some have said that there are more than 300 prophecies of Him in the Old Testament. In Luke 24:44, He claimed that He had fulfilled all of them. No one has ever shown His claim to be false!

**Fifth, prophecy concerns the kingdom of Christ on a regular basis.** As a matter of fact, much of what we have done in this lectureship is to interpret prophecies regarding the establishment of the kingdom seen by the prophets. This kingdom began on Pentecost (Sunday) in Acts 2 (about 1968 years ago).

## **VII. HOW CAN I UNDERSTAND IT?**

**We will answer this question with a series of “Do’s” and “Don’ts.”**

**Do’s**

**1. Do harmonize prophecy with basic Bible truths (for example; John 18:36 and Mark 9:1 teach that the kingdom is not an earthly one and that it would be established during the generation of those then living).**

2. Do travel from the known to the unknown (for example; Isaiah 7:14 allows us to know that a virgin would conceive; Matthew 1 and Luke 1 complete the story by telling us that the virgin was Mary).
3. Do go from the easier to the more difficult (for example; Joel 2:28-32 is impossible to understand apart from its fulfillment in Acts 2:17-21).
4. Do go from the general to the specific (for example; many specific details of the judgment are given in Matthew 24:36-25:46 to amplify the general statement about it in Acts 17:31. Also, many specific details about the destruction of Jerusalem are given in Matthew 24:4-35 to amplify the general questions in verses 1-3).
5. Do compare scriptures that treat the same prophecy (for example; compare Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21 when studying about the destruction of Jerusalem).
6. Do remember that most of it is relatively simple: it is designed for you and me to understand (see Revelation 1:3 and Ephesians 3:3-5).
7. Do look for keys to the passage. Note the following:
  - a. Language: Is it literal, figurative, etc.?
  - b. Dating: What time period is in mind (see Daniel 2:36-45)?
  - c. Addressees: Whom did the prophecy concern (see Revelation 1:4; Genesis 3:15)?
  - d. Author: Who spoke or wrote it and how is he or she involved in it (see Acts 2:25-31)?
  - e. Participants: What other people, even angels, were involved and why (see Daniel 2:38; 8:20,21)?

#### **Don'ts**

1. Don't be led away from your purpose as a Christian into speculation, error, and inactivity.
2. Don't start guessing!
3. Don't get the wrong study aids.
4. Don't jump in the deep end.
5. Don't contradict the truth.
6. Don't "add to" or "take away from" prophecy!

#### **CONCLUSION**

**Do all this in harmony with Revelation 1:3 and 22:18,19.**

**Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy,  
and keep those things which are written therein:  
for the time is at hand.**

**For I testify unto every man that heareth the words  
of the prophecy of this book,**

**If any man shall add unto these things,**

**God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book:**

**And if any man shall take away from the words  
of the book of this prophecy,**

**God shall take away his part out of the book of life,**

**and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.**

**Skip Andrews**