

Some Principles of Prophecy



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Jer. 29:23, 24; Ps. 139:1–6; Dan. 12:4; Rev. 22:10; 2 Tim. 3:15–17; Heb. 4:12.*

Memory Text: “‘But let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD, exercising loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight,’ says the LORD” (*Jeremiah 9:24, NKJV*).

As with most everything else in Scripture, Christians disagree about prophecy, which often convinces others that Bible prophecy is a waste of time. After all, if Christians fight over every prophetic jot and tittle, how valid could it be? Unfortunately, many believers also begin to think that some books of the Bible, such as Revelation, are simply incomprehensible. Instead of reading them, they avoid them, sometimes with the encouragement of a well-meaning pastor who thinks that studying prophecy causes more problems than it solves.

It was not always so. For the first eighteen centuries of Christian history, most Christians were very comfortable with biblical prophecy, and there was a surprising level of agreement on what the key messages of the prophecies were. This is how God intended for it to be: “Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (*1 Cor. 1:10, NKJV*).

This week, we will explore some principles that yield a consistent and reliable understanding of prophecy.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 5.

Whoever Reads, Let Him Understand

Walk into any Christian bookstore and scan through the titles on Bible prophecy. You will quickly discover that there is a mind-boggling assortment of views and interpretations, and it can be tempting to believe that no one can truly understand what books such as Revelation are saying. For example, one author says the antichrist is nothing but a metaphor; another says he is still coming in the future; and another that he was a reference to something or someone in the days of the pagan Roman Empire. As one old preacher put it, “Perhaps the Bible is like an old violin; you can play any tune you’d like on it.”

The Bible itself, however, does not suggest any such thing. Instead, it invites us to read, assuming that God is not speaking in vain and that we can know the truth of what He is saying through His Word.

Read Matthew 24:15; Revelation 1:3; Matthew 11:29; and Jeremiah 9:23, 24. What do these texts suggest about God’s intention to make Himself understood?

Many universities offer courses named “The Bible as Literature” or something similar. For the believer, it can be astonishing to sit through countless lectures, only to discover that the professor reads the Bible the same way one might read pagan mythology. The idea is that there may be a kernel of moral “truth” in the stories, but one can make of the stories whatever one wishes. To these teachers, the idea that this book was inspired by God is laughable.

Thus, the instructor reads the Bible but does not hear the voice of God speaking. Others come to conclusions clearly at odds with the message of the Bible. Without being surrendered to the Lord, and without a heart open to learning the truth, those who read the Bible will likely come away not only missing its message but misunderstanding the loving and holy character of the God revealed in its pages. This could be easier to do than many realize, which is why just reading the Bible without the right tools and (most important) the right attitude under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, can be hurtful.

Someone not known to be pious was found reading the Bible. When asked what he was doing, he responded, “Looking for loopholes. Looking for loopholes.” Why is that exactly the *wrong* attitude to have when reading God’s Word?

God Wants to Be Understood

Nothing is quite as frustrating as urgently needing to communicate, perhaps at a clinic or pharmacy, while in a foreign country where you barely speak the language. You know what you need to say, but you do not have an adequate vocabulary to say it.

With God, a different problem emerges. “ ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth,’ ” He says, “ ‘so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts’ ” (*Isa. 55:9, NKJV*). The problem isn’t that God doesn’t have the vocabulary to communicate with us; the problem is that we don’t have the vocabulary or intellectual capacity to understand Him fully.

What do the following passages suggest about God’s understanding in comparison to our own?

Ps. 139:1–6 _____

Ps. 147:5 _____

Rom. 11:33 _____

1 John 3:20 _____

The truth of the matter is that we will never fully understand the mind of God because He is infinite and omniscient. After all, we can barely understand everything about the creation; how would we fully understand its Creator? We can’t.

Though we will never understand everything, we can understand what is necessary for our salvation. (*See 2 Tim. 3:14, 15.*) When the apostles explained the gospel to their audiences, they frequently referred to fulfilled prophecy, from which we can deduce that one of the key purposes of prophecy is to illustrate the plan of salvation. Indeed, in the end, Bible prophecy must ultimately, in one way or another, lead us to Jesus and the promise of salvation that He offers to all humanity.

After all, the Lord, through whom all things were created (*see Col. 1:16, John 1:1–3*), comes down to this earth and then offers Himself as a sacrifice on the cross for the sins of every human being, even the most wretched. That is how much God loves all of us. Having done all that for us, the Lord would obviously want everyone, wretches included, to know what He offers us in Jesus. And prophecy can do just that.

Though, yes, there is much that we don’t know, why is it crucial to focus now on what we do know and to follow what we know—as opposed to obsessing over what we don’t know?

Daniel—Shut Up the Words

Read Daniel 12:4. What was the Lord telling Daniel here? (*Contrast this with Rev. 22:10.*)

It is not uncommon to hear preachers use Daniel 12:4 to predict the rise of technological and scientific knowledge just prior to the advent of Christ. Many also use it to describe the advances in rapid travel that have taken place over the past century or so. Many of our own books have taken this approach. Though certainly reasonable interpretations, it might mean something else, as well.

Read the passage again. The angel's instruction to Daniel begins with an injunction to "shut up the words, and seal the book." The subject being discussed is the book of Daniel itself. Perhaps, then, could that knowledge which would suddenly increase at the end of time be knowledge of the book of Daniel itself?

This makes the book of Daniel somewhat different from Revelation, in that John was told *not* to seal his book (*Rev. 22:10*). Revelation was meant to be understood from the first, because " 'the time [was] at hand.' " In contrast, Daniel would be understood more clearly at some point in the distant future.

Over the centuries, many fine Christian thinkers attempted to explain the book of Daniel, and some made great headway. Understanding of Daniel increased rapidly, however, after the end of the 1,260-year prophecy, which ended in 1798, when multiple expositors around the globe started concluding that something spectacular was going to happen around 1843. The most notable of these, however, was William Miller, whose preaching launched the Great Advent Movement of the nineteenth century and began a chain of events that would give birth to the "remnant" church and a clear understanding of the three angels' messages.

The birth of our global movement, in other words, is a fulfillment of Daniel's prediction that "knowledge shall increase" at "the time of the end."

In contrast, and without judging people's salvation, think about the "darkness" that so much of Christendom exists in. Something as basic as the seventh-day Sabbath, established in Eden, is ignored, even dismissed, in favor of Sunday, a day rooted in Roman paganism. Or think of the utter ignorance about death, with the vast majority of Christians believing the pagan idea that the dead immediately go soaring off to another existence, which for some means an eternally burning hell.

In contrast, we should be thankful—and humbled—by the knowledge of the truth.

Studying the Word

Seventh-day Adventists owe much to William Miller for their understanding of Bible prophecy. While his understanding of key passages (such as Daniel 8:14) was not perfect, Miller's methodology was, nonetheless, important, because it paved the way for the birth of our last-day remnant movement.

Read Matthew 5:18, 2 Timothy 3:15–17, and Luke 24:27. What do these verses teach us about the way we ought to approach Bible prophecy?

In some ways, studying the Bible is not unlike assembling a large jigsaw puzzle. If you gather just two or three pieces together, it is nearly impossible to discern the entire picture. Perhaps in those two or three pieces, you can see a horse, and so you conclude that you are assembling a picture of horses. But a few more pieces reveal a chicken and a cow, and then once you have assembled hundreds of pieces, you can finally see that you have been working on a picture of a landscape, which includes a city, a farm, and a range of mountains in the distance.

One of the central ways in which some Christians err in their study of the Bible is that they treat the Scriptures as a loose collection of sayings or proverbs that they can use to address a specific situation. Some will turn to the simple study guide at the front of a Gideons Bible, where they can find helpful verses on a number of topics, and assume that it represents the sum total of the Bible's teachings on a given subject.

Unfortunately, they take the same approach to prophecy, lifting an individual text out of its context and comparing it to current events instead of the rest of the Bible. This, in part, has led to the constant stream of modern books on prophecy that have to be updated every few years because they were wrong on what they said was going to happen—and when.

That's why it's so important not merely to select some specific texts on any given topic but instead to study carefully everything the Bible says about that topic and to take into consideration the context in which it says it, as well. It is very easy to pull a passage out of context and make it say whatever we want.

What has been your experience with those who use only certain selected texts to try to make their point about, say, the state of the dead? Or even the Sabbath? What is the best way to respond?

Figurative or Literal?

One of the key issues students of prophecy need to deal with is how to determine whether the language of the Bible is to be taken literally or figuratively. How does one determine if the author was using symbolic language, and how does one know what the symbol represents? The crucial way to do this is to see how that figure, the symbol, has been used all through the Bible, as opposed to looking at how a symbol is used in contemporary times. For example, some see the bear symbol in Daniel 7 as pointing to Russia, because that image is often used today as a symbol of Russia. This is not a sound or safe way to interpret prophetic symbolism.

Look up the following texts, allowing the Bible to be its own expositor (to define its own terms). What is the prophetic symbol common to the texts in each case, and what does the Bible say it represents?

Dan. 7:7, Dan. 8:3, Dan. 7:24 _____

Rev. 1:16, Eph. 6:17, Heb. 4:12 _____

Rev. 12:1; Rev. 21:2; Eph. 5:31, 32; Jer. 6:2 _____

By following the simple rule that the Bible must be allowed to define its own terms, most of the mystery behind prophetic symbolism simply disappears. For example, we see that a horn can symbolize a political power or a nation. A sword can symbolize the Word of God. And, yes, a woman can symbolize the church. Here we can clearly see the Bible explaining itself.

What remains to be answered, however, is why God would speak in symbols instead of being forthright? Why, for example, would Peter cryptically refer to the city of Rome as Babylon, in 1 Peter 5:13?

There may be many reasons why God has chosen to communicate symbolically in prophecy. In the case of the New Testament church, for example, if the book of Revelation had plainly named Rome as the perpetrator of so much evil, the already bad persecution of the church might have been even worse. Whatever the reasons, we can trust that God wants us to understand what the symbols mean.

Even if some symbols and prophecies remain mysteries, how can focusing on what we do understand strengthen our faith?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “An American Reformer,” pp. 319–324, in *The Great Controversy*.

“Ministers and people declared that the prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation were incomprehensible mysteries. But Christ directed His disciples to the words of the prophet Daniel concerning events to take place in their time, and said: ‘Whoso readeth, let him *understand*.’ Matthew 24:15. And the assertion that the Revelation is a mystery, not to be understood, is contradicted by the very title of the book: ‘The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto Him, to show unto His servants things which must shortly come to pass. . . . *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.’ Revelation 1:1–3. . . .

“In view of the testimony of Inspiration, how dare men teach that the Revelation is a mystery beyond the reach of human understanding? It is a mystery revealed, a book opened. The study of the Revelation directs the mind to the prophecies of Daniel, and both present most important instruction, given of God to men, concerning events to take place at the close of this world’s history.

“To John were opened scenes of deep and thrilling interest in the experience of the church. He saw the position, dangers, conflicts, and final deliverance of the people of God. He records the closing messages which are to ripen the harvest of the earth, either as sheaves for the heavenly garner or as fagots for the fires of destruction. Subjects of vast importance were revealed to him, especially for the last church, that those who should turn from error to truth might be instructed concerning the perils and conflicts before them. None need be in darkness in regard to what is coming upon the earth.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 341, 342.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ How can the study of prophecy greatly increase your faith? What prophecies—some written thousands of years ago about events that would happen hundreds, if not thousands of years later—have helped increase your trust in the Bible and, more important, in the God who inspired it? How, for example, does Daniel 2 give us powerful, and logical, reasons to trust not only that God exists but that He knows the future?
- ❷ What are the best ways to protect ourselves from the many wild and speculative attempts to interpret prophecies, sometimes even from those within our own church? Why must we be careful to “test all things; hold fast what is good” (*1 Thess. 5:21, NKJV*)?

“I Want That Book!”

By LAURIE DENSKI-SNYMAN

Tim was a new missionary, and he was scared. He was selling Christian books on a predominantly non-Christian island in Southeast Asia, and he didn't want any trouble.

As he made his way down a street, Tim prayed and nervously stepped into the store of a seamstress. Ahead of him, he saw four people waiting in line. The minutes seemed to drag by.

The wait was taking longer than Tim had expected. He was tempted to leave, but something stopped him. He noticed that the seamstress kept glancing over in his direction with an odd expression on her face. From time to time, she even moved over to one side of the counter, close to the wall, so she could peer around the other customers and get a better look at his face.

Finally, the last customer left the store, and it was Tim's turn in line. But before he could say a word, the seamstress pointed to the books sticking out of his bag.

“I want that book!” she exclaimed. “I want that book, and I want that book!”

“What?” Tim said. “How do you even know that I have books for sale?”

“I had a dream,” the seamstress said. “In the dream, I saw a young man who looked just like you. He had books with him that I needed to read, and one of those books was called *The Great Controversy*. So, I knew that you were going to come. I knew that I had to purchase *The Great Controversy*. Do you have that book?”

Tim's fears about having trouble as a missionary instantly disappeared. He grew excited about selling books. He realized the truth of Deuteronomy 31:8, which says, “And the Lord, He is the One who goes before you. He will be with you, He will not leave you nor forsake you; do not fear nor be dismayed” (NKJV). He knew that God was going ahead of him, paving the way for him to share the good news about Jesus and His soon coming.

Pray for Tim and other missionaries seeking to reach unreached people groups in the Southern Asia-Pacific Division, where this story took place. Thank you for your Thirteenth Sabbath Offering this quarter that will help spread the gospel in the Southern Asia-Pacific Division.

This Inside Story illustrates the following objectives of the Seventh-day Adventist Church's “I Will Go” strategic plan: Mission Objective No. 1, “To revive the concept of worldwide mission and sacrifice for mission as a way of life involving not only pastors but every church member, young and old, in the joy of witnessing for Christ and making disciples,” and Mission Objective No. 2, “To strengthen and diversify Adventist outreach in large cities, across the 10/40 Window, among unreached and under-reached people groups, and to non-Christian religions.” For more information, go to the website: IWillGo.org.