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What the Bible Says About the Future: ISBN 1-59872-275-1

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Introduction to the Study of Biblical Future Prophecy

One of our Lord's final teachings before He went to the cross was that the Holy Spirit would soon come to guide the disciples in "all truth" (Jn. 16:13). At least part of that truth relates to future events, for He went on to say, ". . . and he will tell you what is yet to come." Of course, this was not some new task to the Holy Spirit; He had been revealing the future to God's people for thousands of years, but it does underscore the fact that our Lord considered it very important that His followers know what the future holds for them, and for the world. It is an unhappy circumstance that so few Christians are familiar with what the Bible says about the future, particularly when so much of the Bible is occupied with this subject. Perhaps it is the enormity of the task that deters us from this study, or the complexity of finding our way through the maze of seemingly cryptic prophetic language. Whatever the reason, the Christian who is without a solid foundation in Bible prophecy has missed something God clearly wants him, or her, to have. The good news is that by reading this book, you are already taking a major step toward a greater understanding of these critically important truths.

Why Study Prophecy?

Prophecy isn't just "window dressing" for the Bible; it tells us God's plan for the world, and for ourselves. God's plan is like the keel of a great ship, everything that is part of the ship is somehow, directly or indirectly, secured to the keel; the keel runs all the way through the vessel, and every beam or support, every deck or bulwark, connects to it in some way. Many Christians see the Bible as a collection of stories and spiritual or moral teachings, with no central theme, other than perhaps the vague notion of God's love for man, or the unfolding plan of redemption; the reason is they fail to understand that the Bible is just one story, the story of a sovereign

God who is working through history to bring His chosen ones into His eternal kingdom, where He can manifest His glory and love to them, and through them for all eternity. It is truly the greatest story ever told, and the reason for which God created man. God's great plan for the ages is revealed in prophecy. From creation to the present, and into the eternal future, every movement of history and every verse of Scripture is somehow related – directly or indirectly – to God's master plan. Prophecy gives us a "window" through which we can see that plan (as much as God has chosen to reveal), and understand how the events of history, and our very lives, fit into what God is doing.

Aside from the fact that neither biblical nor secular history makes much sense apart from understanding God's great plan, there are other reasons to study what the Bible says about the future; let's take a look at some of those reasons. 1) The emphasis that God places on prophecy tells us its importance. About one-fourth of the Bible is prophetic. It seems safe to assume that if God devoted so much of the Bible to prophecy, it must be important. 2) Jesus had severe criticism for the people of His day; in fact, He predicted the destruction of Jerusalem, Israel's political and religious capital, would happen because they failed to recognize the time of His coming. Had the people of Jesus' day been more attentive to Bible prophecy, they should have been able to recognize who He was, since His life was the fulfillment of many Old Testament prophecies. Of course, like our time, many of the people of Jesus' day didn't have hearts inclined toward God, nevertheless Jesus' charge was that they did not recognize the time in which they were living (Lk. 19:44). It's sad to be living at a time when God is doing a special work and completely miss it because we are unaware of His purposes. 3) Scripture tells us that an appreciation of prophetic truths has a purifying effect upon our lives. John says,

[1 Jn. 3:2-3] Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.

John tells us that the hope we have in Christ, that someday He will appear and transform us into His likeness (physically, as well as spiritually), can and should affect our lives now. The fact is, the study of future prophecy equips us to be more effective for Christ in the present, because it allows us to rise above our near-sighted view of life and see things from God's eternal perspective. As John says, the impact on our present life will be nothing less than revolutionary.

4) The study of the future, sometimes referred to as "eschatology" [Gr. *eschatos* "last things" + *logos* "an utterance," or "a word"], is interrelated to other Bible truths in such a way that if we fail to understand one, it affects our understanding of the other. It's like getting a few pieces of a puzzle out of place – it's bound to negatively affect the rest of the picture. What the Bible says about the future is important in understanding salvation, the nature of the church, the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit, the nature of God, and many other truths. Ignorance of Bible prophecy leaves a void in many areas of our understanding of God and what He is doing. Just think how our faith would be affected if we knew nothing of Heaven or Hell, yet we forget that they too are prophetic truths.

5) The study of Bible prophecy serves as a reality check. The fact that so many Christians view prophecy as something "shadowy" or "unreal" only serves to underscore how badly this reality check is needed.

6) Paul lists hope as one of the three principal qualities that every Christian ought to possess (1 Cor. 13:13). The problem is, hope is inseparably linked to our perception of the future; without hope, we are defeated. God has told us things about the future in order to encourage and motivate us. Those who throw open the windows and allow the winds of biblical prophecy to blow across their lives will find renewed vision, a challenge for personal purity, and a deeper understanding of all God's truth – prophetic or otherwise.

Areas of Agreement Concerning the Future

Since we're going to be comparing viewpoints for a moment, we need to define whose views we are including. For our purpose, we will limit ourselves to the segment of Christianity that accepts the full verbal-inspiration of Scripture; there's not much point in talking about the prophetic views of those who do not accept inspiration, since many do not believe in predictive prophecy at all.

Among those that do accept the full verbal inspiration of the Bible, there is great diversity of opinion on how future prophecy is to be understood. Nevertheless, we are not without a consensus on some basic issues. The following represents areas where there seems to be general agreement. 1) Man possesses an immortal soul, meaning the soul will exist someplace forever. 2) Regarding the intermediate state (between death and the resurrection), it is generally believed to be a conscious existence in the presence of Christ, free from pain and suffering for the redeemed, but a temporary state of suffering for the unredeemed, to be followed by judgment and eternal suffering. 3) There will be a future bodily resurrection of the dead. 4) There will be a future judgment (or judgments) for both the saved and the lost. 5) Christ will return bodily to this earth to bring about a consummation of His program—though beliefs concerning the details differ widely. 6) There is to be an eternal state for both saved and lost, with the saved inheriting Heaven and the lost inheriting the Lake of Fire (Hell). These are fairly basic truths of Scripture, and for those who assign any degree of literality to the interpretation of the Bible these truths seem beyond dispute. However, there is great difference of opinion as to how all this fits together in the final scheme of things.

Areas of Disagreement Concerning the Future

Even among those that accept the full verbal-inspiration of Scripture, there are areas of disagreement concerning the meaning of future prophecy. For the most part, those disagreements fall along the following areas. (Further along, we'll discuss why these disagreements exist; for now, don't let the differences and any unfamiliar terminology confuse you, all of this will be explained as we cover each subject in detail later.)

The nature of the millennium

In the history of the church there has been considerable disagreement over the nature of the millennial kingdom (which is the first phase of God's eternal kingdom). There have been three major views. "Amillennialism," holds that there is to be no literal millennium on earth, rather the prophecies of the millennium must be understood allegorically (with Christ now fulfilling those prophe-

cies as He rules over His kingdom from Heaven). Accordingly, amillennialists believe we are now living in the millennium and that Christ will conclude this present period at His second coming and usher in the eternal phase of the kingdom. "Postmillennialism" proposed that the millennium will be brought about through the spread of the gospel, with the aid of human achievement and technology, and that Christ will appear at its conclusion to receive His kingdom and bring in its eternal phase. This view is not widely held today (though there is a form called "theonomy," or "reconstructionism" that has attracted some adherents). "Premillennialism" holds that the millennial prophecies of the Bible can only be fulfilled by a literal earthly reign of Christ, which of course, would have to be a future event. (The term "*pre-millennial*" refers to the belief that Christ will return to the earth before the millennium to establish His kingdom personally.)

The nature of the tribulation

Not surprisingly there are also differences of opinion regarding the nature of the tribulation. One view (held by both amillennialists and postmillennialists) sees the tribulation prophecies as fulfilled historically, perhaps through the Roman persecutions or general trials through the course of the church age. Premillennialists generally view the tribulation prophecies more literally and regard them as describing events that will take place in the future. Premillennialists disagree over just how literally the tribulation prophecies should be interpreted. "Dispensational premillennialists" interpret tribulation prophecies at face value, whereas "covenant premillennialists" tend to view those prophecies less literally. One form of covenant premillennialism (known as imminent posttribulationism) states that the church could be in the tribulation now. Obviously, such a view would have to interpret the tribulation prophecies in a highly figurative, or allegorical manner. (Such an interpretive process is often referred to as "spiritualization.")

The timing of the rapture

The rapture refers to Christ's return for His church. There are several views regarding the nature of the rapture and when it will occur. Covenantalists, regardless of their millennial views, agree that the rapture occurs at the second coming of Christ — though they

don't all put the second coming at the same place. (Amillennialists and postmillennialists place the second coming at the end of the millennium; however, covenant premillennialists place it prior to the beginning of the millennium, at the end of the tribulation.)

Dispensational premillennialists are not agreed either. Some place the rapture before the beginning of the tribulation (pretribulationism), and others place it at the midpoint (midtribulationism), or near the middle of the second half of the tribulation (Rosenthal's pre-wrath view). Another view, partial rapturism, holds that only part of the church will be raptured, while the remainder will be left to go through the tribulation. [The author holds to yet another view in which the rapture could occur at any moment, but without the necessity that it must happen before the tribulation begins (this view will be referred to as "imminent pre-wrath rapturism"). We will take a closer look at each of these views later.

The nature of the church

The nature of the church (the "body of Christ" – not the visible church) is of critical importance in the study of future prophecy. The reason is simple: The rapture is a promise to the church, and one's view of when the rapture might occur (in relation to other future events) is largely dependent on one's concept of the church. Covenantalists believe the church is composed of all believers that have ever, or will ever live. If one defines the church that way, they would naturally view the church as being present during the entire tribulation period, since there will be believers present on earth throughout the period. Dispensationalists view the church differently. They believe Scripture presents the picture that only redeemed people living between Pentecost (A.D. 33) and the rapture are included in the church. In other words, dispensationalists don't see the Old Testament believers as part of the church. This view allows for distinct prophetic programs for both Israel and the church. Since dispensationalists don't view all believers throughout history as part of the church, they don't see the presence of saved people throughout the tribulation as evidence that the church is present. They believe Scripture teaches that Christ will return for His church before God's wrath is poured out at the day of the Lord (in the tribulation

period); though they disagree as to exactly when within the tribulation the day of the Lord begins.

How the church is defined is undoubtedly the single most important factor in the interpretation of future prophecy. Covenantalists, who believe the church is simply a continuation of (or replacement for) Israel, generally apply the promises made to Israel to the church (allegorically, of course). Such a view has broad ramifications not only in the interpretation of prophecy, but in general biblical interpretation as well. Dispensationalists, who believe the church is distinct from Israel, see the church and Israel as recipients of unique but interrelated prophetic programs, such that each group has promises made specifically to it that should not be confused with promises made to the other. Going back to our analogy of the ship, Israel and the church would represent two major beams attached to the same keel. Just as the ship has but one keel, so there is one plan for history, but many components within that plan.

The timing of the resurrections and judgments

You've probably guessed this already, but one's view of the timing of the resurrections and judgments is interwoven with what one believes regarding the nature of the church, the rapture, the tribulation, and the millennium. (If you are new to the study of Bible prophecy, don't get frustrated, this will make a lot more sense later; besides, Satan has worked very hard for two-thousand years to "muddy the water" so you would just give up on ever understanding the future God is preparing for you.)

Dispensational premillennialists believe the resurrection of the righteous will occur in connection with the rapture and the second coming (*i.e.*, a two-phase event). This two-phase resurrection is necessary due to the fact that at the rapture only the church is resurrected, so there must be an additional opportunity for the Old Testament saints, and those saved after the rapture to be resurrected. Covenantal premillennialists believe that all the dead saints, including the Old Testament saints, will be resurrected together at the second coming (which is where they put the rapture), so they see no need for a two-phase event. Both these groups generally place the judgment of believers immediately after the resurrection (whenever

it occurs), and both place the resurrection of the unrighteous after the close of the millennium.

Amillennialists and postmillennialists see only a general resurrection of both the righteous and unrighteous dead after the millennium, with one general judgment for both groups. They usually view Matthew 25:31-36 as describing this judgment, whereas premillennialists view this passage as describing the judgment occurring after the second coming to determine who will enter the earthly millennial kingdom. These differences may seem perplexing if you are new to the study of future prophecy; however, there are some rather simple patterns that serve as the underlying framework for each of these views, and we will explore those patterns in chapter three, *“How Systems of Belief Affect Our View of Future Prophecy.”*

Logical versus chronological study of future prophecy

It is important to note that the major topics covered in this study are not presented in the chronological order in which they will unfold (rapture/tribulation, millennium, eternity), but rather in biblical/logical order (millennium, tribulation, rapture, eternity). There are two reasons for studying future prophecy topics in logical rather than chronological order. 1) This is the order in which God revealed these truths to man. 2) It is necessary to study future prophecy in logical sequence so we can develop the theological basis (antecedent theology) for understanding each successive truth. Obviously, what one believes about the tribulation is greatly affected by what they believe about the millennium, and what they believe about the rapture of the church is largely the product of what they believe about the tribulation and the day of the Lord. Covering the elements of future prophecy in their revealed sequence allows us to build a foundation for the understanding of each successive truth. However, it is still useful to have a chronological overview in mind before diving into a detailed study of these topics; that’s the purpose of the next chapter – to give a “bird’s eye view” of the future, in chronological sequence.