

Interpreting the Old Testament Prophecies

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If you are reading this article hoping to get all of your questions answered about when Jesus is coming back, you're in for a disappointment. What I'm hoping to do in this brief talk is to lay a foundation of some basic ideas about prophecy in the Bible that are really not very well understood. It's sad that that's the case, because the result is horrible.

"Jesus Is Coming Back—Soon!"

A few years ago I was doing a "Bible Prophecy Tour" in Australia, and we were going around these little towns to these little Presbyterian churches. If you think Presbyterian churches here are dead, you ought to go over there! Some of those churches are deep frozen. They put up banners in these little towns in Australia saying, "Bible Prophecy Conference – Dr. Richard Pratt from the United States." The whole town would come—everybody, no matter what denomination they were. There might be a couple hundred people during the first hour. The first thing I would always say would be this: "I will succeed today if I convince you Jesus is not coming back for another million years." Of course that got their attention.

But as I started talking about prophecy, and we took a break, all of a sudden this group of two hundred got down to about, oh, fifty. And by the third hour, after the second break, it got down usually to about fifteen. That's about how many people were there in the Presbyterian church, you understand—fifteen. And it was only their members that stayed.

Part of the reason for that is when people hear "prophecy," what they expect is somebody to get up and tell them who the Antichrist is and how many more weeks we have until Jesus is coming back. They were expecting me to tell them things like, "Every prophecy has now been fulfilled, so Jesus is ready to come." I mean, just watch those TV shows. The televangelists always tell you, "Jesus is coming back, and he's coming back very, very soon." And the moral of the story always is, "Send me your money." I always want to tell these guys on TV, "Look, if you believe Jesus is coming back soon,

you send me *your* money and I'll invest it and I'll do something with it for my grandchildren. How about that?"

So if you think I'm going to tell you that he's coming back next week, that kind of thing, you're going to be disappointed. Instead, what I'm going to try to do is to provide you with what we might call an alternative.

Disappointed by Popular Prophecy

One of the biggest problems we have in the church of Jesus Christ today is that we really don't have alternatives in the way we look at Bible prophecy. There's this popular view of how to look at the Bible, especially in the area of prophecy, which is just all over, everywhere you go. It's on TV, it's on Christian radio, it's in Christian book stores; you name it, it's there. This very popular approach talks about Jesus coming back next week, and all that sort of stuff. And there's practically nothing out there to give you an alternative.

I remember when I was in high school trying to figure out my basic theology. I was working very hard to read in this subject and read in that subject and to understand this and understand that, and I was getting a lot of these basic things worked out. Finally I decided I needed to figure out what was true about prophecy. I went to the bookstore and said, "I need a book on prophecy." They said, "Well, there's only one book you need to read—*The Late Great Planet Earth*." I didn't know any better. I didn't know that there were other views. I didn't even realize that this was something that the church had only believed since Hal Lindsey lived on this earth. After all, it had sold six trillion copies by that time, so I figured it must be true.

A lot of us felt tricked because of that. Some of us are old enough to have experienced this. You believed some of the things you saw on TV, and then suddenly you realized, "Well, it didn't happen like they said." But they came back the next week and said, "Well, it's going to happen this way." And so you believed it again. But again it didn't happen that way. Then they come back another time and said, "It's going to happen this way. We've really got it now." But it didn't happen, so you felt tricked. This is the way it often happens. People sometimes get abused by very sincere and well-meaning Christian leaders who promote these kinds of views of prophecy.

If you have felt victimized, and a lot of you probably have or you wouldn't be reading something like this, there's a natural reaction. The natural reaction is to become apathetic, to say, "Well, who cares. Nobody can understand that stuff anyway. Let me just look at the parts of the Bible I really can understand," which usually equals Paul's epistles. So you just stick with what you can do. Well, God didn't give us the whole Bible so we'd stick with Paul's epistles. Now, don't get me wrong. I like Paul. But that's not the whole Bible. In fact, the biggest chunk of the Bible is prophecy. So it may very well be that we need to start figuring out how to understand it better.

Prophecy Is Not a Fortune Cookie

One of the things we have to do is to stop thinking about prophecies as if they are fortune cookies. When you go to the Chinese restaurant, you always open up that fortune cookie and it says something like: "Today's your lucky day," and it gives you the Lotto numbers. Sometimes that's the way we look at prophecy, again, usually because we don't have a better way to do it.

We need to start thinking about Bible prophecy a whole lot more like we think of other parts of the Bible. Let me give you an example. When you read the book of Philippians or listen to somebody preach from the book of Philippians, they almost always start off with a background to the book. The preacher may say, "This week we're beginning a series on the book of Philippians. Now let me tell you what was happening in the apostle Paul's life at that time. He was in jail . . ." Then you start reading the book of Philippians from this perspective. You understand that this is Paul writing, and he's writing from within the jail, and he talks about the soldiers and all the things that are there, the gifts that he received, and things like that.

That's the way that you read the parts of the Bible that you love the best. And it's the way that we need to begin to read prophecy. We should *not* read prophecy as if it's a Chinese fortune cookie, just picking a verse out and going, "Wow, that looks like something really important," and then believing whatever we want to believe. We need to start looking at it more from the perspective that we normally take when we read something out of the New Testament. We must ask questions like, "Who wrote this? Why was it written? For whom was it written?"

I remember one time being in the Ukraine, talking about some other subject, and a fellow in the back of the room lifted his hand up and said, "Do you think that the meltdown at Chernobyl is a sign of the end of time, that Jesus is coming back very soon?" I thought for sure it had been mistranslated and I wasn't getting the point, so I looked over at the pastor and said, "Did he say what I think he said?" The pastor explained to me that Chernobyl means *wormwood* in the dialect there. In Jeremiah it says, "In the latter days there will be wormwood." So this fellow had lifted this verse out of the book of Jeremiah, Chernobyl had melted down, and he therefore saw it as a sign of the end of time.

That's the way it always is. There was a big prophecy conference just before Y2K. All the experts in all the United States were there. And some guy pulls a verse out of Ezekiel where it says, "I will confound their numbers," and says, "You see! Y2K! It's a sign of the end of time."

Five Periods of Prophecy:

The only way to avoid that kind of buffoonery, clowning around with the Bible, misleading and abusing people and then discouraging people from looking at this part of the Bible, is to begin to do a little more like what you do with Paul's epistles.

Now, you know one of the biggest problems with that? We can understand what a jail is, and we can understand Philippi. We kind of understand Paul. But when it comes to the prophets you're into the mire of all those long lists of kings, of this nation and that nation, and millennia of events, of this war and that war, this famine and that famine over there, and that earthquake over there. It's just one gigantic mess! That's why you've got all those time tables in your study Bibles, because they're trying to make sense out of it. But when you look at those time tables you go, "Well, that doesn't make any sense to me. There's just too much in there."

What I want to do is just give you a simple five-step way of organizing the history of prophecy in the Old Testament. We're going to summarize which prophets go where and what they said, in really huge, broad strokes. But I'll tell you—if you can get these five things, you will be amazed at how much sense it will make out of the books of the Bible called the Prophets.

1) Early Monarchy

The first period we need to think about when it comes to prophecy is the early monarchy, the time of David and Solomon. This is the time when the kingdom of Israel was united under the house of David. Things were pretty good for the people of God during time. It was with the coming of kingship in Israel, during the days of David and then Solomon, that prophecy really started coming in full swing. This is when prophets began to pop up all over the place.

What sort of things did these prophets do, people like Nathan and Gad and a few others? Well, one thing the prophets of this day *didn't* do was to write any of the prophetic books that we have in the Bible today. We don't have any books written by anybody that lived in these days. But they still provided backgrounds for the part of the Bible that we call Prophecy.

One background was that of royal ideals. Do you realize that in the Bible that as soon as you have the house of David established as the ruling family, that became an ideal for the rest of the Bible? That's why you call Jesus "King," because he's the Son of David. From the time that David's family was established, that family was to rule over Israel and rule over all people of God, no matter what nation they were in. This became an ideal that forms a background for every prophet in the Bible. When the prophets talk

about the good times, they are talking about when the son of David is doing the right thing. The bad times are when the sons of David are doing bad things. So this ideal of the time of David and Solomon was enormously important to them.

But you remember that Rehoboam split the kingdom into Israel in the north and Judah in the south, kind of like the Yankees and the Confederates. This is the second reality that prophets have to deal with—the people of God split in two. So some prophets are doing their thing up north. Other prophets are doing their thing down south. Sometimes the people up in the north will prophesy about what's going on down south, and sometimes the people down south will talk about what's going on up north.

But you always have to remember that this is not the ideal. This is not the way God wanted his people to be—divided and torn asunder like that. The ideal was for them to be united and joined together under the One Son of David. So this early monarchy period really does form a background, a sort of baseline for what prophecy is, and if you can get that, you'll understand a whole lot more about what the prophets talked about.

You see, the prophets are not concerned with Chernobyl. They're not concerned with Y2K. They're not designed to teach you to look for an antichrist in the White House, or that Mikhail Gorbachev's birthmark is the mark of the beast. This is what you see if you go to the Web or turn on Christian television. Just watch ten minutes on Christian television and you'll hear somebody say something wacko like that.

Instead, this is what the prophets are concerned about: they're concerned about the people of Israel, the people of God, under the One Son of David as they ought to be.

2) The Assyrian Judgment

That brings us to the second period of prophecy, the Assyrian judgment. Assyria was a big nation that occupied basically the land that we now call Turkey, and a little bit into Iraq. They were a huge country. There were lots of prophets that worked during this time: Jonah, Hosea, Amos, Micah, Nahum and Isaiah. They were all concerned about something really big. God had decided that the sins of Israel were so great that he was going to send a foreign power, the Assyrians, to destroy them.

There were just three big events during this period, and you can easily learn them. The first one, in 734 BC, is called the Syrian-Israelite coalition. The nation of Syria got together with the Yankees in Israel (that's the northern kingdom) and they tried to force the southern kingdom of Judah to join with them and to rebel against the Assyrians.

Now, this was a big problem, because it meant they had lost their faith in God. The northern kingdom, whom we call the Yankees, had to decide whether they were going to follow Yahweh or not. They decided not to follow the Lord, and as a result, God decided it was time for them to be destroyed. So in the year 722 God sent the Assyrians, and they destroyed the capital city of the north, called Samaria. (Heard of the

good Samaritan? That comes from the word Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom.) The Assyrians came and crushed them, just utterly crushed them, in 722 BC.

Then there was one other time when the Assyrians came and attacked the people of God, this time not in the north, but in the south. They came all the way to Jerusalem during the days of a king by the name of Sennacherib, in 701 BC. The Assyrians destroyed practically everything in their path. They came right up to the gates of Jerusalem. King Hezekiah was in the city, and Isaiah the prophet was in there with him. Hezekiah went to Isaiah and said, "Help me! What do I need to do?" Isaiah said, "What you need to do is trust the Lord and start praying like crazy." And Hezekiah did just that. He prayed and the Lord delivered Jerusalem and drove the Assyrian army away. End of the Assyrian judgment.

The prophets Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Hosea, Amos and Isaiah all deal with this. This is what they talk about. They talk about the fact that the Israelites should not resist the Assyrians but they should trust Yahweh. They talk about the fact that God is going to judge the kingdom of the north because they were wicked, because they oppressed the poor, because they were immoral, and because they had turned away from God. They predict that Samaria is going to fall, and it does. The prophets also predict that the Assyrians are going to come against Jerusalem and, as Isaiah says, "almost destroy it; but Jerusalem will be delivered." And it happens.

So that's the basic event that's behind the ministries of the prophets in this period. These books are not talking about things that are happening in America today. They're not talking about the communists. They're not talking about Chinese armies marching across the Tigris-Euphrates valley. That's not what they're talking about. They're talking about things that happened back in the 700s BC. Now, they do give hope to people for the future, and things like that. But they're not talking about you and me directly. It's very important always to remember that, because otherwise you end up twisting or perverting their words to suit whatever program you think is the right program to follow.

What were some of the main themes these prophets spoke of? Well, they said the northern nation of Israel was going to fall to Assyria, that they were going to be destroyed and go off into exile. And that happened in 722. But there was a second thing that they said. They said that eventually Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrians, was going to fall. In other words, "You touch my people, I smack you down." Those prophets also said things like this: that Judah should watch what happens in the north and learn a big lesson. Can you imagine what that lesson might be? That's right—repent of their own sins and start trusting Yahweh, because if they don't, what's going to happen to them? Same thing. Of course they didn't. So finally, Isaiah predicted that Judah would one day fall to the Babylonians.

Remember, Hezekiah was delivered from the Assyrians in the year 701, as we noted a few minutes ago. But practically the next day Hezekiah turned away from trusting God and tried to cut a deal with the Babylonians to protect him against any future attacks. You can find this in Isaiah 39. As a result of that, Isaiah looked at him and said, "Now

look. Let me tell you what's going to happen, Hezekiah. God is going to send the Babylonians and take everything you have away." So Isaiah sort of closes the period of the Assyrian judgment by saying that Judah is going to get it, but get it from the Babylonians, because they refused to continue to trust God even after he had delivered them from the Assyrians.

Then there's one final, very important theme of the prophets during this period. Even though the north is going to fall to the Assyrians and even though the south is going to fall to the Babylonians, there's still hope . . . that one day they will return, that God will restore his people. As bad as it's going to get, God will not desert his people utterly. He's going to bring them back. He's going to restore them after this time. In fact, in the restoration they will be even greater than they were at the beginning. There is the promise, and we'll look at it a little bit later, that things are going to be unbelievable for the people of God once they come back from the Exile.

So back to the idea of knowing that Paul is writing from the jail . . . If you're reading the book of Isaiah, you need to think, "OK, I'm in the period of the Assyrians; judgment and blessing is going to come to the people of God in a particular way." Or, "Hey, I'm in the period of the Assyrians when I read the book of Micah. He's talking about that. He's not talking about Jesus coming, and he's not talking about things happening in America, and he's not talking about South Africa or anything like that. He's talking about the days of the Assyrian judgment." If you can understand that and begin to read prophecy that way, you'll be able to avoid being victimized by all of these people on TV. That way you can keep your money.

3) The Babylonian Judgment

The next big period is the Babylonian judgment. Remember Isaiah said the Babylonians were going to come and attack Jerusalem and destroy it? Remember, that's the capital of the south. Now there were many prophets that talked about this: Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Joel, Obadiah, Habakkuk, Ezekiel and Daniel. That's what these guys were concerned with. You see, the Assyrian trouble had gone away by this time. The Babylonians had been lifted up and they had conquered the Assyrians, and now they were coming after the people of God.

There are three big events during this time, and it's really the same thing happening three different times. What happens is the Babylonians attack Jerusalem. First they do it in 605 BC, and they take a bunch of people away. They attack again in 597 and take a bunch more people away. They attack a third time in 586, absolutely destroy the city and take practically everybody out. That's really all that happens during that time.

It was unthinkable that God would let Jerusalem be destroyed, absolutely unthinkable to a normal person walking down the street, living in Israel at the time. But the prophets kept saying, "The unthinkable is going to happen, because you keep turning from your God. He's going to send the Babylonians and they're going to destroy us." So he sends the Babylonians in 605, and they take a couple thousand people away to Babylon—some of the rich folks like Daniel and his buddies.

What do you think the people in Jerusalem thought at that point? "Well, that wasn't so bad. We didn't like those rich people anyway." They didn't feel so bad in 605, so they kept sinning. Then comes 597; the Babylonians come in and take Ezekiel and a bunch more people out. What do you think the people left there were thinking? "Well good. That just means more room for us. Property values are going down. That's great. We can buy low." They didn't care. "We still have the temple." You know that passage in Jeremiah 7 where Jeremiah says, "You say, 'the temple', 'the temple', 'the temple'," and Jeremiah looks at them and says, "Don't you think for a second that that's going to protect you from anything. The only thing that could possibly protect you is if you repent." But they don't.

So in 586 the whole show's over. The Babylonians come in, they destroy the city and they destroy the temple, and they send almost everybody either into exile or into slavery or into death. It was a horrible time, just unthinkable. What did the prophets of that time say? They said that Babylon would utterly destroy the people of God. That was one of the main things they said during this time. The other thing they said was that the exile was actually going to last a long time. We'll talk about that a little bit later. But they also said that one day God would make a restoration of his people. Remember, the prophets always had this happy ending.

We've seen the restoration theme twice now—one time during the Assyrian period, and now during the Babylonian period. That's very important to us as Christians. Do you have any idea why? Because that's what Jesus is. We're going to come to that in a little while. But the reality is this is what they said during the Babylonian period: "God is going to destroy us. Watch out. Here it comes. But also one day he will restore his people."

4) The Restoration Period

The next period of time, from 539 to 400 BC, is what we could call the Old Testament restoration period. A lot of people don't know this, but a handful of Israelites, maybe fifty thousand of them or so, according to archaeologists, actually came back to the land. The Babylonians didn't reign forever. There was another kingdom that came and whooped up on them. Do you know who they were? The Persians. There was a king whose name was Cyrus. He came and destroyed Babylon, took it over. And when he did, what he decided to do, by God's grace, was to allow the Israelites to go back. So he encouraged them. He said, "I want you to go back and I want you to build your temple and I want you to do all the right things. It'll be great. It'll be fantastic."

And so they did. They came back under the leadership of a governor, a son of David. His name was Zerubbabel. And everybody's thinking to themselves, "Man, this is great. Look what's happening here. We're coming back from the land. We've got Zerubbabel; he's the son of David. We're going to go back there, we're going to build the temple. Man, it looks like everything God said from the prophets is going to happen right now, right before our eyes. Because look—he said he was going to bring us back; he said it was going to be great. Look! Look what's happening. It's happening right before our eyes!"

But it kind of wound down pretty fast. In 539 to 538 they did return. Then Haggai the prophet steps onto the scene and he says, "You live in houses of cedar, but the house of God lies in ruins." That's what was going on. They had come back and they were building their own houses, but they weren't building the temple like they were supposed to. It took them five long years to rebuild the temple. And when they got finished with it, they looked at it and went, "Wow, that's not so nice." In fact the elders started weeping, they were so disappointed.

Then, by the time you get to the year 450, just one hundred years after they'd come back, they had begun to intermarry with foreign women. They began to mix their religion with other religions, and so you ended up with widespread apostasy in Israel. And that's where you get Ezra and Nehemiah doing all their reforms and building the city and getting people to straighten up. Then they turn around and they have to do it again; then they have to do it again, and they have to do it yet again. Then was an absolute collapse.

You know what it's like when you have a weak battery in your car? The car turns over and goes "rrourrrr, rourrr, rourr, rrrrr, rrr, rr, r, r...." Right? You ever done that? I've done it a lot. That's what happened here. They came back, "Rrourrr, Rrourrr!" Things are going pretty good. They were rebuilding the temple, they had Zerubbabel. "Rrourr!" But they came intermingling and apostasy... "rrr, rr, r..." It's over. The people of God went into a period of darkness for some 450 years.

So what do the prophets of this time say—Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi? They say things like this during the early days: "We've got great potential. This could be the time. If we'll do the right thing, if we'll just repent and follow what God says, this could be the time when Israel and the people of God are restored and great things will happen—times of great blessing." But, unfortunately, they didn't do it. The restoration community failed terribly. They went out and mixed their religion with other religions, and as a result the prophets said, "God will restore his people, but it's going to be a long time from now."

You know that passage you always hear in Handel's Messiah—"And he shall purify the sons of Levi"? It's from Malachi. So what is that about? What Malachi is saying is this: things are so rotten in this post-exilic restored community that Messiah is going to have to come and even purify the sons of Levi, the priests. And so they waited for that day for some 450 years, for Messiah to come and set things straight.

5) Intertestamental Period

This 450-year period of darkness between the Old and New Testaments is what we call the "Intertestamental Period," where there is no prophecy, where there is no revelation, where all they can do is wait for this to be over.

During this time the Israelites had all kinds of things happen to them. The Greeks ruled over them, then they had the Maccabean revolt against the Greeks. Then the Romans came and crushed them. As a result, the Jews were divided into different

denominations. You had the people who were Zealots, who wanted to kill everybody and bring in the kingdom. You had the Pharisees, who wanted to burden everybody with the laws and traditions and bring in the kingdom. They thought, in effect, "If we're just righteous enough we can bring in the kingdom." You had the Sadducees who denied the resurrection and sort of said, "The kingdom doesn't really matter all that much; we're all just going to float up to heaven anyway."

And then you had the people like John the Baptist, who said, "Forget all that stuff. I'm outta here. I'm out to the desert. I'm going to wait for Messiah to come." So by the time John the Baptist is around, John the Baptist is one of many different groups that were running around in the desert area out on the other side of the Jordan. They were sort of hiding out, because sometimes they were greatly persecuted. You've heard of the Dead Sea scrolls and the Qumran community. That was one of them. You've heard of the Essenes. That's another one of them. They're all disenfranchised groups running around saying, "When's Messiah coming?"

John the Baptist was one of these. But he said, "He's coming very, very soon. Repent, because the kingdom of heaven is at hand. And it's not going to come over there in the city with the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the Zealots. It's going to come in the most unbelievable way you can imagine. Just watch. I don't know how, but it's going to happen." Then Jesus appears and John says, "Behold the Lamb of God."

Then all of a sudden people start talking about all these prophecies, about Israel being restored and Judah being restored. Lots of people's eyes begin to open up and they say, "Ah, here it is. It's going to be restored in him!"

In Summary:

So, whenever you hear people quoting from Ezekiel and telling you these are Apache helicopters, you need to ask yourself a question: Now wait a minute. When did Ezekiel minister? Ezekiel ministered during the Babylonian period, during the time of the Babylonian judgment. He talks about all kinds of things, like what to do when you get back to the land, and things like that. But he doesn't talk about Apache helicopters!

Or you may hear people say that when Nahum talks about fire coming from their chariots he's really talking about tail lights on cars, and that this is a sign of the end of time, that you have red tail lights on cars. The next time you hear something like that you can say: Now wait a minute. Nahum. Where did he minister? What period was that? The Assyrian period. Nahum is not talking about your Volkswagen. Nahum is talking about the Assyrians. He's talking about Israel and Judah.

Even if you can't get into the details and work it all out, you can have a basic orientation knowing those sorts of things. If you can just say, "I may not know exactly what it's talking about, but I know it's not talking about tail lights. I know it's not talking about Apache helicopters. I know it's talking about real people living a long time ago in Israel

and Judah during the Assyrian judgment and during the Babylonian judgment, and during that brief restoration period." If you can keep even that most basic historical orientation, you'll go a long ways.

Let me tell you a little story that will help illustrate this. Suppose George Washington and Adolf Hitler are both in a room. I walk up to George Washington and say to George Washington, "I just want to tell you how much I appreciate you, because I'm an American and you're the father of my country and the father of democracy. You've meant so much to me." But Hitler has been listening, and he says to me, "I sure am glad somebody finally understands that I'm the father of democracy, and that I have fixed America and made everything great for you."

What's wrong with this picture? It's pretty simple. I was talking to George Washington, not Adolf Hitler. Hitler made a big mistake in thinking that I was talking to him when in fact he was overhearing a conversation about another. He was not hearing a conversation directed to him. And because he didn't remember that, he ended up misunderstanding severely.

That's what we do when we think that prophets are talking about America and modern history and cars and nuclear bombs and meltdowns at Chernobyl and things like that. We're overhearing, but we forget we're overhearing. We act as if they are talking directly to us. We need to remember we're overhearing them talk during the Assyrian period and the Babylonian period and the post-exilic or the restoration period. That's what their conversation is about.

That's what these Bible prophecy experts do when they read in the newspaper that the European Union is happening and they say, "Ah, can't you see it? It's right there in Zephaniah chapter 3 verse 2!" They are failing to see that it's not written directly about us.

Now, let me ask you something. Does this mean that what I said to George Washington is irrelevant to Adolf Hitler? I mean, do my words have nothing to say to him at all? No, of course not. What should he have learned? That George Washington was good. What else should he have learned about himself? That he is scum. That's what he should have learned. But he didn't learn the right lesson because he forgot he was overhearing and thought he was just hearing.

What they said back in those days does have relevance for us. But it's only when we remember that they're not written directly to us. If you can get that picture, you can begin to read the Bible and understand what those prophets were doing, rather than thinking that you've got to be looking behind every nook and cranny for another sign that Jesus is coming back in a week. And you can stop giving your money to those types of ministries and feel OK about it!

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