

TLCBiblical.com Video Lessons
213 - Prophecy, Symbolic Language & Interpreting The Bible
Part 3 - Prophecy In The New Testament

1. Introduction

In this third and final part of our discussion of prophetic language in relation to symbolism, we'll examine prophecy that we find in the New Testament. The character and focus of these prophecies is different from what we saw in the Old Testament. In this lesson we'll discuss **Prophecy In The New Testament** and how we need to approach and understand it.

12. Prophecy in the New Testament

The twenty-seven books that compose the New Testament begin their narrative in the waning years of the Law of Moses. The content of the New Testament is made up of:

1. The Gospels that tell us what to believe in
2. The book of Acts which records the history of the early church
3. The Epistles explaining the new law and how to remain faithful, and ...
4. The book of Revelation, an epistle to seven churches in Asia, that encourages faithfulness and warns against apostasy

The Old Testament prophets wrote to the Lord's people who existed as a physical nation with a spiritual identity. The writers of the New Testament address God's people who exist as a spiritual kingdom with a physical presence in the world. The work that God had planned for the salvation of man was complete in the coming of the Messiah and establishment of the church. For that reason prophetic writings are fewer and deal with a shorter list of subjects. If we list the areas addressed in the New Testament prophetically we have:

1. A falling away / rise of error
2. The second coming of Christ and the resurrection
3. Overthrow of a persecuting power against the church

By the end of the first century, God's word had been revealed and statements in the New Testament indicate that the revelation was complete. God's work was done and as I've pointed out in previous lessons, we're living in the last days. Let's take a look at each of these areas so we have a better understanding of them.

13. A falling away / rise of error

In the history of the world we can't find an example of a group of humans who didn't have problems and eventually divided over differences of opinion. The kingdom of Israel was given a law which was placed in the hands of God's people. Over time these people neglected the

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law, drifted into idolatry and eventually were destroyed by the Lord. A remnant was allowed to return and resettle the nation for the purpose of bringing the Messiah into the world. It wasn't long however before they fell into neglect and were rebuked by Malachi. During the first century Christ rebuked the religious leadership for teaching doctrines not sanctioned by God (**Matt 15.7-9**). Failure to adhere to God's commands is as old as time and began with Adam and Eve who disregarded the Lord's directive not to eat the forbidden fruit (**Gen 3**).

After the church was established it wasn't long before people began to lie, as in the case of Ananias and Sapphira (**Acts 5.1-10**), or who tried to monetize spiritual gifts as Simon the sorcerer did (**Acts 8.18-24**). Paul was sent to the gentile world to preach the Gospel (**Acts 9.15, 13.2-3**) and as he did so we see two things happen. Jews who disliked the preaching of the apostle stirred up crowds against him and followed him from city to city turning people away from the truth. There were others who began to teach things that were contrary to the Gospel and some forged letters claiming that Paul had written them. Others disputed the apostles authority and Paul answered these individuals and planned on confronting them.

The law of God is complete and will guide us so that we can be acceptable to him, but not everyone has a mind to conform to the law. Some might see this as a flaw and pick at the scriptures but this has been true from the beginning. Paul stated, "***But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.***" (**2 Cor 4.7**). Those who handle the law of God need to be true to the scriptures. Paul also told the Corinthians, "***Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful.***" (**1 Cor 4.1-2**). Later he wrote to Timothy stating, "***the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.***" (**2 Tim 2.1-2**). Its not impossible to read an instruction book and follow the steps that are given. Humans however are never content to leave things alone. Some can't find it in their mind to just read and do. Others reject what's stated and believe they have a better idea which they not only practice but influence others to follow as well. This happens in every organization, but when it involves the kingdom of God, the results are catastrophic.

On his way to Jerusalem following his third preaching trip, Paul met with the Ephesian elders at Miletus and warned them that "***after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.***" (**Acts 20.29-30**). In his letters to the Thessalonians, Paul dealt with a false teaching regarding the status of the dead and the second coming of Christ. This doctrine asserted that those who had passed on wouldn't be able to reap the benefits of Christ's return. Some were teaching that the second coming was imminent and apparently some had stopped working and were waiting for the big event. Sound familiar. How many doomsday

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cults have we seen in our time who believe the end of the world has come and gather together for the happening. Some have even killed themselves with these ideas in mind. Paul dealt with the second coming which I'll discuss in a few minutes, but he stated that Jesus wouldn't return before something else happened - a falling away.

First is the reassurance that the dead aren't going to miss out on anything. Paul states, *"But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him."* (1 Thess 4.13-14). That should have settled the issue but the problem persisted and precipitated a response in a second letter. In his second letter Paul tells them what would happen before Christ's return.

"Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come. Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his own time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming. The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness." (2 Thess 2.7-11). Let's break this down and look at the elements Paul is talking about.

a. *"that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first"* - Christ wouldn't return before corruption in the church reached a point that it had fallen away. Changes in doctrine, worship and organization of the church were already underway by the end of the first and early second century. The Thessalonians could rest assured that they weren't faced with the imminent return of the Lord at that time.

b. *"and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition"* - Some interpret this as the **"antichrist"**. John however states that in the first century there were many antichrists in the world at that time (1 John 4.3). The individual who is identified here has some characteristics that Paul notes:

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1. This man *opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped*
2. *he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God*
3. Paul refers to him as *the lawless one*
4. He would fool people with *all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception*

c. “*For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work*” - Although the apostasy wasn't full and hadn't grown into what it would become in a few centuries, the process had already begun.

d. “*He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way*” - The errors that were beginning to take root were held in check by the power of truth reinforced by the presence in the world of the Holy Spirit - the “*helper*” that Christ stated he would send to aid the apostles in their work. The gifts of the holy spirit, which I'll discuss in the series on doctrine, were transmitted to faithful Christians when the apostles laid their hands on them and prayed to God. Paul informs us that it was God who granted these gifts for specific reasons in line with the abilities individuals possessed (**1 Cor 12**). Because of this, when the last apostle died, the gifts were no longer granted and so the work of the Spirit was done. The work of the Holy Spirit was to guide them into all truth, continue the revelation that Christ began, teach them what to say and inspire the writers of the New Testament to write the books that we have today. Once the last apostle, believed to be John, died, the miraculous aspect of the Holy Spirit was taken away. While this influence was present in the world, error and false doctrine were held in check.

e. “*they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved*” - The dangers of error are that many will believe it and be lost. This same trait existed in physical Israel and in the end the nation was consumed with idolatry and hate toward the Lord. Today there are those who profess to teach the word of God but when we examine what the scriptures have to say, their doctrines fall short. Those who accept such ideas generally develop a hateful attitude toward those who attempt to steer them back toward the scriptures. Because of their rejection of God's word, the Lord will allow them to continue in unbelief and be lost. He's provided us with his word and preserved it through the ages so we have no excuse for not finding out what it says for ourselves.

f. “*whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming*” - The error that takes root will continue throughout time and breed disciples until Christ returns. At that time we're told that all will bow their knee to Christ and confess that he's Lord (**Rom 14.11**) and give an account of the things that

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we've done in the flesh. Those who practice error will be condemned by the one they misrepresent, just as the false prophets and priests of Israel and Judah did long ago.

The New Testament deals with the danger of error and false teaching in other places as well, but Paul gives us a precise picture of the process. In his letters to Timothy he provides insight into how this takes place and adds additional characteristics of the apostasy that we've noted above. ***“Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer.” (1 Tim 4.1-5 NKJV).*** Let's break this down like we did for the passage from 1 Thessalonians.

g. ***“Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith”*** - Paul indicates that while the apostasy was beginning it hadn't grown to an advanced state yet. He points to a time beyond the first century when this will take place. Although no frame of reference is indicated here, we know that the process had already begun from Paul's statements in 1 Thessalonians.

h. ***“giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons”*** - Whenever one departs from the truth that's been revealed in the scriptures they're teaching and being influenced by evil. We can define evil as that which opposes God and pursues those things that work against the Lord. That doesn't mean that Satan is controlling individuals but it does indicate that human weakness and the tendency to reject God is as alive and well today as it was when Eve allowed herself to be tricked by the Devil to violate God's commands. While Satan can't control or force us to do anything he does have an influence and can provide opportunities for us to be led astray. Paul talks about this in his letters to the Corinthians. Paul states that ***“the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them.” (2 Cor 4.4).*** Many are misled by false doctrines and find it difficult if not a ridiculous notion to challenge mainstream religious thought and discover the truth for themselves.

I. ***“speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron”*** - I'll never stop wondering how some claiming to be teachers of God's word can stand up and make statements they know aren't consistent with what the Bible teaches. The reason for that? Paul says it best - they're telling lies and have so damaged their idea of right and wrong that they can't be touched by it. The idea here is that their conscience has been

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violated and become like scar tissue that's lost its ability to feel pain. This results usually from reading God's word, feeling convicted by what's being stated and refusing to give in to what's taught. There are too many people in the world who will never acknowledge facts even when they're staring at them. This then leads them to speak to the unknowing in such a way as to convince them that what they're teaching is valid when that is very far from the truth.

j. As we saw in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, there are additional characteristics of these teachers and their doctrine that he outlines. These are:

1. ***"forbidding to marry"*** - In the beginning God stated that it wasn't good for the man to be alone and created a helper for him in the form of woman (**Gen 2.18-25**). God brought the couple together and sanctioned their work and intimacy. God commanded the couple to be fruitful and multiply (**Gen 1.27-28**) indicating that sexuality was the right of the married. As the church fell away there were doctrines adopted teaching that purity was void of any relationship that satisfied sexual desires. Intimacy and sexuality were seen as tainted and "dirty" which is the opposite of what God provided for us. There are too many people in the world who equate being a Christian with a lack of sexual pursuit and see the experience of intimacy as a weakness. Throughout the scriptures we find statements that encourage and emphasize the joy and beauty of a healthy sexual marriage. The only prohibition to this is that one who is not married may not engage in this activity and those who are married must contain their activities within the privacy of their relationship. The writer of Hebrews sums this up nicely when he states, ***"Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled..."*** (**Heb 13.4**). The only sexual relationship sanctioned by God is the joining of one man and one woman. The apostate church would teach that this was not spiritually pure, creating problems within the church, and eventually causing a large part of the population to turn away from learning about God.

2. ***"commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving"*** - Dietary commands ended with the passing of the Law of Moses. The only prohibition still in effect today is the universal condition placed on mankind that we aren't to eat blood. Aside from that there's no intrinsic value in eating or not eating meats or other foods. Those who impose these ideas on believers are going beyond the doctrine of the New Testament and practicing error.

This has been a lengthy discussion of this topic but it's a significant point that's dealt

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with in the New Testament. As far as prophecies go we can list the apostasy as one of the primary warnings. We can now list all of the characteristics of the falling away and see for ourselves if these conditions have been met and therefore fulfilled.

1. The man of sin is revealed
2. He sits as God in the temple of God
3. Shows himself that he is God
4. Forbids marriage
5. Commands to abstain from meats
6. Lord will destroy him with the breath of his mouth at his coming

The question we need to ask ourselves is - have these conditions been met, and can we trace their development historically. The answer to that is yes to all but one. The final prophecy that hasn't been fulfilled is the destruction of the man of sin by Christ at his return which leads us to our next area, the second coming of Christ.

14. The second coming of Christ and the resurrection

From the disciples who questioned Jesus, to the Thessalonians, the New Testament reveals there was a preoccupation concerning the return of Christ. We know that Christ stated he would return and the angels who spoke to the disciples at his ascension stated he would return in the same way. So, that essentially is a prophecy, but are there any statements about when that will take place, and how will be able to tell when its fulfilled. Let's take a look at what the scriptures teach.

- a. Christ stated that his return would be without warning and added that only God knew when the end was (**Matt 24.36**).
- b. Jesus stated that his return would be as a thief in the night and warned his disciples to be ever vigilant (**Matt 24.42-44**). This statement is repeated by Paul (**1 Thess 5.2**) and Peter (**2 Pet 3.10**).

Based on these statements we see that not only can we not predict the return of Christ, its the decision of God the father. I'm reminded of Moses statement to the children of Israel that the "*secret things belong to God*" (**Deut 29.29**) and we can't discover the secrets of God. Its futile then to think that we can determine when God will decide that he's had enough of this world and will bring time to an end. One of the characteristics of God is that he's a creator not a destroyer and only acts when there's no hope. In the days of Noah there were only eight souls saved and the world was fully populated at the time. God sent prophets to Israel and Judah for years to warn them and bring them to repentance. When there was no remedy (**2 Chron 36.16**) God

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allowed his people to face the consequences. Ezekiel sums up God's attitude best in regard to evil when he states, "***Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord God: and not that he should return from his ways, and live?***" (Ezek 18.23). God doesn't want to destroy the world, but he will.

So how do we know when this will be fulfilled? The answer to that is also very simple. We won't, but we have a description of the following events that will take place when the Lord returns:

1. The trumpet of the Lord will sound and all will hear (**1 Thess 4.16, 1 Cor 15.52**)
2. The dead will rise first and the faithful be joined to the Lord (**1 Thess 4.16**)
3. The living and dead will be judged and the faithful will be with the Lord (**Rev 20.12**)
4. Every knee shall bow before Christ and confess that he is Lord (**Rom 14.11**)
5. We will all give an account of the things that we've done (**Rom 14.12**)
6. Our bodies will be changed (**1 Cor 15.52**)
7. The earth and physical universe will be destroyed (**2 Pet 3.10**)
8. Christ will then present the church - the saved believers to God (**1 Cor 15.24**)

The events of the second coming are unmistakable and really aren't what we want to see happen - because when they do, things will be at the lowest point spiritually since the days of Noah. Christ asked "***when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?***" (**Luke 18.8**).

Paul gives us a preview of this. "***And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power; When he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe (because our testimony among you was believed) in that day.***" (**2 Thess 1.7-10**). To add to the severity of the event is the writer of Hebrews statement "***It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.***" (**Heb 10.31**).

15. Overthrow of a persecuting power against the church

The book of Revelation is one of the most controversial and debated books in the Bible. There are many who see the book as a roadmap to the return of Christ and identify events that will take place prior to the Lord's return. Others take the view that the prophecies in the book take place over the course of history leading up to the modern time and end with indications of the second coming. When we look at the book more objectively we see a different picture.

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Revelation is a book that identifies itself as filled with signs that were to come to pass shortly (**Rev 1.1**). The primary recipients of the books were seven churches located in Asia Minor which is modern day Turkey. There are two main components of the book - statements to the seven churches, and prophecies concerning the future.

The statements made to the seven churches include recognition of things they were doing right and rebuke for things that needed correction. Images in the first three chapters contain items similar to the implements in the Tabernacle. Christ and the churches are represented and many of the early images are either obvious in their meaning, or, are explained. Beyond chapter three however many run into trouble and become confused. Some try to decode the various creatures and circumstances by linking them to real world events and place them on a timeline. For some this means that the prophecy is ongoing leading to an endpoint. But there are some statements in the book that provide us with often ignored keys. If we summarize what we can discover in the book we find that:

- a. Revelation is a figurative book meaning the content of the writing occurs during a vision that John was given and therefore is not literal.
- b. The purpose of the book was to warn Christians who were struggling to repent, be faithful and weather persecutions that would come upon them.
- c. The persecuting power is specifically identified as Rome and we even have a geographic description of the city sitting on seven hills.
- d. The overall message of the book is that the power will be judged by God for their sins against his people and eventually overthrown while encouraging Christians to remain faithful
- e. There's a subtle note of warning throughout the book about the rise of apostasy that is beginning to take place at the time it was written. This, coupled with warnings to the seven churches, emphasizes faithfulness to the word of God.
- f. The persecuting power ends abruptly and the entire world is said to mourn and stand in shock at its demise
- g. The book ends with a glimpse of the righteous being saved and closes with a warning that the word of God is not to be altered.

The book is written during the period under the new law - the Gospel. The conditions for service to God have changed so that all nations are able to come to the Lord. The persecuting power, identified as Rome, falls and impacts the nations around it. The prophecies in the book have been fulfilled with the exception of statements concerning the return of Christ and stands as an encouragement to remain faithful no matter what. But there's another other more subtle element related to the apostasy that I mentioned.

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In the book we find that there's a man, whose number is 666, who rises to power. I've talked about this in my lesson on the numbers of God but I'll summarize the main points here.

1. The number 6 is close to 7 representing fullness, or completion & the power of God
2. The number 6 is repeated 3 times indicating that this closely resembles God's work
3. This man is involved in the deception of the nations

If we analyze this in light of what we've learned about the scriptures we can demystify the meaning in a way that I think is valid and compatible with what other passages teach. In order to place this in its full context we need to start with the reason Christ would address these churches to begin with.

We know that an apostasy was going to take place. Paul addressed the Ephesian elders concerning their need to remain faithful and warned that some of their own number would be involved in error. As we look at the history of the church we find that after the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the area of Asia Minor becomes a prominent center for Christians. Over the years the first changes began when certain philosophical ideas and mysticism began to be introduced into the church. Changes were taking place as early as the second century and eventually these became the basis for what we know as a diocese. Congregations were to have at least two elders and these had jurisdiction over the local body they were part of. Over time elders, or bishops began to exercise authority over groups of congregations. Singular elders, not multiples, were placed in these positions while other changes were taking place at the same time.

Added to this is the fact that persecution was on the rise and continued until the mid fourth century when the emperor Constantine, who wanted to use Christians and their influence as a means of stabilizing the empire, ordered a meeting of bishops at Nicea. The result of this meeting was a statement of belief known as the Nicene creed. Although the writing was a statement of belief in Christ there are problems with it. First, it's a manmade document that was seen as a definitive statement of the position of the church. It was ordered as a way of ending strife among the bishops and set a precedent for such councils to issue doctrinal statements in the future. A practice that continues today.

Secondly, this was a statement ordered by Constantine, a government official. This set a precedent that outside authorities could influence the position and behavior of the church. There's some debate over Constantine's faith at the time but the fact is that historically he wanted to use Christians as a means to unify and stabilize the empire. We have to remember that the only authority over the church is Christ, and the only document that states our beliefs is the word of God. The Nicene creed was a dangerous turning point that eventually saw the church model itself after the Roman government. Eventually a universal bishop was elected to oversee

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the church and issue doctrine. We recognize this position today as the Pope of the Roman Catholic church. We can understand how this came about if we consider the following points.

1. Mankind has always had a tendency to alter or ignore God's word
2. Changes were taking place in the church long before Constantine
3. When faced with the possibility of ending persecution an alliance with the emperor was the obvious choice
4. By allying itself with the emperor, Christians made compromises that affected the teaching, practice and structure of the church
5. This fusion of secular and spiritual power resulted in a tyrannical force that overwhelmed the western world for centuries
6. Rejection of the dominance of the church fueled the rise of humanism, atheism and other ideas opposing the idea of following God

The book of Revelation is highly symbolic and difficult to understand. As we study the scriptures we have to keep the idea of context in mind. This reinforces the principle that passages will agree with each other and if our interpretation of a symbolic form causes a conflict with other passages we need to step back and study some more.

16. Next

As we've seen in this lesson, symbolism is powerful and has to be handled carefully. The power of the Bible lies in the connected nature of the word and as we come to terms with the various symbolic forms these connections become clearer. The Old Testament is filled with powerful figures and objects that reinforce the New Testament. In the next lesson we'll discuss **Shadows In The Law** as we begin an examination of physical elements in the Law of Moses that serve as types or foreshadows of what was to come.