



Eschatology – A Study of the End Times

Lesson 6: Interpreting Biblical Prophecy

Introduction

God has given us His Word because He wants us to know about Him and how we can have a personal relationship with Him. But how did His Word come about? God used human authors to write down exactly what He wanted to say. In theology we call this inspiration. The inspiration of Scripture does not mean the human writers felt enthusiastic about their writings but that what the human authors wrote was “God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16). Inspiration may be defined as God’s superintending of the human authors so that, using their own individual personalities and even their own writing styles, they composed and recorded without error His revelation to mankind in the words of the original manuscripts.¹ The human authors were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21) to write down what God wanted to say. Put another way, God *moved*, and the prophet *mouthed* these revealed truths. God *revealed* and man *recorded* His Word to mankind.² How does one go about interpreting what the man recorded, especially regarding prophetic passages? In this lesson, we are going to look at how we ought to approach biblical prophecy so that we can rightly understand what God has revealed concerning future events.

The Best Approach³

In order to understand what God has revealed to mankind, we must rightly interpret what God has revealed. The best way to interpret Scripture is to take a literal approach. The word *literal* as used in hermeneutics (the science and art of interpretation) comes from the Latin *sensus literalis*, which refers to seeking a literal sense of the text as opposed to a nonliteral or allegorical sense of it.⁴ This approach seeks out the basic, normal, or plain way of interpreting all of Scripture. When we rightly interpret the Bible, we will understand it the way God intended it to be understood, including Bible prophecy.

- Micah 5:2. What does a literal approach indicate about the birth city of Jesus? _____

¹ Ron Rhodes, *The End Times in Chronological Order* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2012), 10.

² Ibid, 11.

³ The following is adapted from *The End Times in Chronological Order* by Ron Rhodes.

⁴ Ibid, 13.

- Isaiah 7:14. What does a literal approach indicate about the miraculous nature of Jesus' birth? _____

Just as we are to take a literal approach to the prophecies of Christ's first coming, the best approach to understanding the prophecies of Christ's second coming is the literal approach.

- Luke 12:40. What do you learn about the second coming of Christ based on a literal approach? _____
- Philippians 3:20. What do you learn about the second coming of Christ based on a literal approach? _____

Six Reasons for a Literal Approach

1. It is the normal way to understand all languages. God gave us language to communicate and expects us to use it in its normal and plain sense to communicate. This applies not only to God's spoken Word, but also His written Word.
2. The greater part of the Bible makes sense when taken literally.
3. The literal approach allows for a secondary (allegorical) meaning when demanded by the context.
4. All secondary (or allegorical) meanings actually depend on the literal meaning. We would not know what is not literally true unless we first know what is literally true.
5. The literal approach is the only sane and safe check on our subjective imaginations.
6. The literal approach is the only approach in line with the nature of inspiration.

Exceptions to a Literal Approach

In taking the literal approach to Bible interpretation, this does not eliminate figures of speech, symbols, and parables. The books of Daniel and Revelation use figures of speech and symbols. However, when rightly interpreting figures of speech, symbols, and parables they always teach us something literal.

Figures of Speech

- Psalm 91:4. What does a literal approach teach about God's "wings"? _____
- Psalm 94:22. What does a literal approach teach about God as a "rock"? _____

Symbols

- Revelation 1:20. What are the “seven stars” in Christ’s right hand? What are the “seven golden lampstands”? _____

- Revelation 5:8. What are the “golden bowls full of incense”? _____

Parables

- Matthew 13:24–30. What does the parable of the wheat and tares mean? _____

- Matthew 13:31–32. What does the parable of the mustard seed mean? _____

Certain guidelines are helpful when determining when a passage should or should not be taken literally.

1. When it is _____ that it is figurative. In John 10:9, Jesus is not a literal door.
2. When the text itself _____ the figurative sense. Such as Galatians 4:24 where Paul tells us he is speaking allegorically.
3. When a literal interpretation would _____ other truths inside or outside of the Bible. Such as Revelation 7:1 speaking of “the four corners of the earth.”

“When the literal sense makes good sense, seek no other sense lest the result be nonsense.”

Understanding Prophetic Scripture

While some people believe that you cannot understand prophetic Scripture, the promise that God gives us is that we can understand it. In order to understand it, we must be “accurately handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). The following rules are helpful to remember when seeking to understand prophetic Scripture.

1. Always seek the _____ sense.
2. Submit all doctrinal _____ to Scripture.
3. Pay close attention to the _____.
4. Make a correct _____ judgment.
5. Consult _____ and _____.
6. Remember that one prophetic passage may apply to more than one _____.

Why Biblical Prophecy Is Important

1. It proves the Bible is the Word of God. In the pages of Scripture, over 100 Old Testament prophecies of Christ's first coming confirm that God knows the future. There is no other book in the world like the Bible. It is "God-breathed."
2. It proves that the Bible can and should be trusted. Because God is 100-percent accurate in foretelling the future, as seen in Christ's first coming, we can trust that God will be 100-percent accurate concerning the future events about Christ's second coming.