

Several years ago we studied the book of Revelation. There's always a great interest in prophecy. Everyone wants to know, "What's going to happen?" We study prophecy for several reasons:

1. It reminds us God is sovereign. He has a plan and will bring to pass what He has promised.
2. It reminds us that God is good. He does and will judge wickedness and evil. When we suffer, He will bring good from it . . . even our ultimate good . . . a place with Him in heaven.
3. Prophecy motivates us to holy living. Believers who do not anticipate the Lord's return will have a greater tendency to allow sin to take up residence in their lives. When we see how harshly sin is judged (especially in study of the Old Testament) and realize the price Jesus paid for OUR sin, then we want to follow the instruction "Be holy for I am holy."
4. Prophecy helps us establish proper priorities. Kingdom living influences our decisions on time, money and resources. We have an eye on what has eternal value when we know prophecy.
5. Lastly, prophecy gives us hope. We do not need to live our lives under a blanket of fears, defeat and depression. Knowledge of prophecy means we don't engage in wishful thinking about the future, the believer can look ahead with confident expectation that God will accomplish ALL He has promised.

It may sound strange, but it's true that prophecy is best understood by going back to the past to perceive what God is going to do in the future. When we studied Isaiah (the first of the major prophets) a couple of years ago, we learned of a child to be born of a virgin, about the Suffering Servant, and got a grand description of the millennial kingdom. This year we're going to study the other three major prophets – Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. We'll also include Jeremiah's journal of Lamentations and a study of the prophet Zechariah with an overview of prophecy at the end.

You know when you go out for a meal that's served buffet style, you're given the invitation to serve yourself. There's quite a range of dishes to choose from according to your taste. This is fine for eating but it doesn't work in Christian terms. One of the reasons why there's spiritual poverty is that believers have taken the "salad bar" approach to Scripture. Can we really pick and choose the teachings we're comfortable with and ignore the rest? The answer, of course, is "no." To do that is to have stunted spiritual growth. This is a year of meat and veggies. It's good for you!

There are four things that concern me regarding our study this year . . . I'll tell you what they are and then elaborate a bit on each.

First, that we have an overall view of Scriptures (the Holy Bible) and how the prophets fit into it.

Second, that we recognize the prophets spoke . . .

...to the people of **the past**, the people of their own day, to warn them of judgment to come and give them a hope for the future.

...they speak to us **today**. People haven't changed. Jeremiah will tell us in 17:9 that "the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure." Our lesson material is designed to bring application into your life.

...they speak to the **future** – God does have a plan: the rise of the Antichrist, a seven year period of tribulation, the rebuilding of a millennial temple, the Second Coming of Christ, judgments, a thousand years of peace as Christ reigns in the millennium, and a new heaven and earth.

The third thing is that we apply good principles of what is called Bible hermeneutics. That's a \$10 word for the science of interpretation.

And fourth, that we not get bogged down in God's judgment and fail to see God's grace through the ages! It is by His grace that you and I are here today with complete copies of Scriptures (His Holy Word) to instruct us. Just as the specifics meant something to the people of the prophet's day, we count on those same specifics of prophecy in our hope for the future.

So -- AN OVERVIEW OF SCRIPTURE . . . A MESSAGE FOR THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE . . . SOUND INTERPRETATION . . . A FULLER KNOWLEDGE OF GOD.

Let's expand a little on each of those. The overview of Scripture – I want to give you a thumbnail sketch of your Bible.

The Bible is not only history, it is His Story, the story of Jesus Christ, the Messiah. God reveals His plan for us in progressive revelation. That means that little by little, as His people could comprehend something new, God would give them the direction and the prophetic future they would need to follow Him in faith.

(Thought you might enjoy this cartoon) – Overhead.

In the Old Testament, we have the record of God's creation. Genesis 1-11 tells of Adam and Eve and their fall to sin by directly disobeying God. Cast out of the Garden of Eden, mankind began to multiply. Wickedness in the heart of man grew and in the days of Noah, God decided to destroy the world by water. But Noah was "a righteous man and walked with God." Believing God, Noah built the ark, followed His instructions in faith, and Noah's family was saved.

Once again, the earth was repopulated through Noah's sons – Shem, Ham and Japeth. The people were instructed to spread out over all the earth. Instead of obeying God's direction, however, they stayed in one place and in their pride built the Tower of Babel "to reach to heaven and make a name for themselves." So God confused their languages and those who could understand each other began to group together and spread out into new communities and countries as God intended.

Beginning in Genesis 12, God called a specific man, Abraham, to go to a new land He would give him and his descendants. Abraham and Sarah followed God in faith.

At first God dealt through what we call the Patriarchs:

Abraham had two sons – Ishmael and Isaac

Ishmael through Hagar (handmaiden to Sarah) became the father of the Arab nations today. That's why there is so much fighting in the Middle East today. They claim the land as it was promised to Abraham because he is also their father. Isaac was born of Sarah. He was the child of promise and it was God's choice that through the line of Isaac the Messiah would come.

Isaac had twin sons – Esau and Jacob

Esau sold his birthright (being the first born meant he had the primary inheritance) for a bowl of stew. Jacob would carry the ancestral line of the Messiah.

Jacob had twelve sons. Jacob wrestled with God and his name was changed to Israel. That is why his twelve sons are called the “twelve tribes of Israel.” Jacob's favorite son was named Joseph. His jealous brothers sold him into slavery and he was taken to Egypt.

Joseph had hard times and good times in Egypt. Through God's help in interpreting Pharaoh's dream, Joseph rose to a

position of “prime minister.” Eventually he was able to bring his father, Jacob, and his other brothers to Egypt to settle there because famine was rampant in the world, but Egypt had plenty.

Joseph died and the new Pharaohs were fearful of the increasing number of Israelites, so they put them into slavery for a period of 400 years as God had foretold. When the time was right, God raised up a deliverer named Moses. With God’s powerful miracles to convince Pharaoh, Moses led the people out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, to the foot of Mount Sinai. Here the people needed to be instructed in how to worship a holy God. God gave them the Ten Commandments, instructions on worship, designated the Levites to be His priests, and gave them instruction on how to survive in the new Promised Land. Now God would change from using the Patriarchal system to using a nation – Israel – to be His “chosen people” in the world.

The books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy and Joshua give the details of God’s worship instructions, the 40 years of desert wandering because of disobedience, and the events of the Israelites finally settling the new land. They had been warned to totally destroy the inhabitants of the land when they entered because the people were completely wicked and worshipped idols (false gods). God knew

those idols would be a snare for His people. The Israelites did not do this and for the rest of the Old Testament, again and again, it would be the primary cause of God having to bring punishment and judgment on His people in hopes of restoring them to Himself.

The book of Judges has seven cycles of SIN-PUNISHMENT-REPENTANCE-DELIVERANCE-PEACE. When things got good again, the people went back to sin. The book ends saying, “Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” Eventually the people wanted a king “like the other nations had.” God said through the prophet Samuel, I’ll give them what they want but they wouldn’t like it. He also told Samuel, “It’s not you they are rejecting, it’s Me.” A king was chosen.

What we call the “united” kingdom had three kings: Saul, David and Solomon. Each reigned 40 years. David wrote many of the Psalms. Solomon wrote most of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon. When Solomon died, the kingdom divided. Ten tribes went to the north and were called Israel. Israel’s capital was Samaria and they had 19 kings . . . all of them evil in the sight of God. God sent many prophets to Israel to warn them of their evil ways. God announced His intention to bring the nation of Assyria from the north to conquer them and disburse them among the nations if they did not repent. God never punishes or judges without ample warning. God’s warning became a reality for the northern kingdom in 722 B.C.

Two tribes (Judah and Benjamin) stayed in the south in the capital of Jerusalem. They were called Judah and had 20 kings . . . only eight of them were considered “good” in the sight of God. When you read the books of Kings and Chronicles it seems like you’re reading the same thing over again. That’s because Kings is written from a historical viewpoint and Chronicles is from a priestly viewpoint. Well, the reforms of the good kings delayed God’s punishment, but again the lengthy and repetitious warnings of the prophets to Judah went unheeded. Finally, God brought Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon against Jerusalem to take Judah off into captivity in 586 B.C. for a period of 70 years as prophesied by Jeremiah.

Even in exile, God had a prophetic word for His people. Ezekiel and Daniel, while they were in captivity, had visions not only of God’s promised restoration to the land near-term, but also visions of tribulation and restoration in the end times.

Eventually God raised up Cyrus to defeat Babylon and the captives were allowed to return to their homeland. Ezra led one group back and Nehemiah came with others later to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem. A new temple was begun, but the people got lazy and God sent the prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi to spur them on to finish the work.

Throughout the Old Testament Scriptures, God warned and God punished . . . BUT there was always the future hope of the Messiah, the

Redeemer, the full restoration of Israel to the land, and the promise that one day God would once again dwell with His people as He had done in the Garden of Eden.

But for 400 years between the Old Testament and the New Testament God was silent. The world was changing. It was John the Baptist who would announce, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” The people of the day were under Roman rule. They wanted a Messiah who was a conquering king to free them from foreign domination. But God sent a servant-king. Remember Isaiah 53?

The New Testament opens with the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John tell of His life, His ministry, His miracles, and His death on the cross as the full payment for all mankind’s sins. Jesus came as a Jew and was rejected by His people. God proved Jesus was the Messiah, indeed the very God the Son (second person of the Trinity), by raising Him from the dead. Christ appeared to many in His resurrected body before ascending to heaven to be seated at the right hand of God. He departed with the promise He would come again. The disciples who ministered with Jesus and were witnesses of all He said and did were commissioned to “go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to do everything I have commanded you. And surely, I will be with you always, the very end of the age.”

In the Book of Acts the disciples received power from the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the church was given birth. It spread out (mostly through persecution) from Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, to the ends of the earth. In Acts, Peter took the gospel to the Gentiles but God chose Paul, a Pharisee converted on the road to Damascus, to become the apostle to the Gentiles. Throughout his three missionary journeys he began by going to the Jew first, then to the Gentiles. He established church after church and wrote letters to them to encourage, correct and rebuke them as needed.

Paul's letters to the churches and to Timothy and Titus make up most of the remainder of the New Testament. The author of Hebrews is unknown, but the message is about the superiority of Jesus Christ over angels and grace over the Law.

James, Peter and Jude offer instructions to the church in their short letters. Always included are instructions for living the abundant Christian life, seeking holiness, learning to live with each other and for God. Continually we are reminded that ALL the promises of Scripture will be fulfilled.

Finally, the apostle John wrote the Book of Revelation when he was in exile on the island of Patmos. It is a book of warning, of prophecy, of visions, of hope. Jesus is coming again! He will reign from Jerusalem for one thousand years before this earth is destroyed by fire and God creates a new heaven and a new earth.

God has a plan. Salvation has always been by God's grace. Ephesians 2:8-9, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast." The Ten Commandments was perfect law, but no man except Jesus Christ could keep them without sin. Since sin breaks our fellowship with the Father, we needed a bridge over that barrier of sin. God Himself provided that bridge in the person of His Son. Romans 10:9-10 says, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved."

There is yet a time of judgment coming for those whose pride and hard heart rejects the Lord Jesus. Their self-chosen destination is hell . . . an eternal separation from God. God's love calls for all to come to repentance. He wants no one to perish. God is monumentally patient but His day of wrath will come. He wants to prepare a place for you in heaven to be with Him always. There is only one standard for goodness – it is God's standard, not man's standard. The Scriptures are God's precious gift to us so that we might understand Him, see His heart, and reverence His holiness, power, and majesty. That why we study the Scriptures verse by verse and watch. God's plan is still unfolding!

Now let me give you a little background on the prophets we'll be studying this year. Their message was for the past, present and future.

The Northern kingdom of Israel was taken into captivity by Assyria in 722 B.C. about 100 years before Jeremiah began to preach to Judah. At that time Ahaz was an evil king of Judah. Subsequently the throne passed in succession to Hezekiah (a good king), Manasseh – a king whose reign has been characterized as a political and moral cesspool – Amon (an evil king) and to Josiah (a good king). We've included a chart on the kings in the lesson packet you'll be receiving.

Jeremiah began his prophetic ministry during Josiah's reign. Judah was still subject to Assyria, then a world power for almost 300 years. When Josiah died, the people chose Jehoahaz. The Assyrian capital of Nineveh was under attack by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, so Egypt's Pharaoh Neco decided while they were distracted fighting each other, he'd get a bigger piece of the power pie and place Jehoiakim on the throne of Judah as a puppet leader.

Babylon defeated Assyria and turned attention to Egypt . . . defeated Egypt and became THE power of the day.

With Assyria and Egypt in check, Nebuchadnezzar turned his attention to Judah. In 605 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar brought Jehoiakim to his knees and carried off hostages, among them Daniel and his three associates. Later in 597 B.C. on another expedition to Palestine, after some rebellious acts of Jehoakim and his son Jehoachin (who had

succeeded his father), -- remember Kim had a Chin -- Nebuchadnezzar again made Jerusalem submit. This time he carried off 10,000 captives, among them king Jehoiachin and the young prophet Ezekiel.

Nebuchadnezzar appointed Zedekiah (Jehoiachin's uncle) as ruler. He ruled as a vassal to Babylon for eleven years but eventually rebelled bringing about the final siege and destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

Jeremiah prophesied through the reigns of Josiah to Zedekiah. It was his task to convince the people and the rulers of Judah that Babylon (the nation from the north) was divinely destined to be Judah's master for the near future and turning to other nations like Egypt for help would add to the horror of the doom and judgment to come.

Daniel wrote after his deportation to Babylon as did Ezekiel, although Ezekiel was not called to prophesy until he'd been in Babylon about five years.

We have included Zechariah in this year's study. He is considered a "major" minor prophet. Chronologically he belongs to the post-exile era. In 538 B.C. Cyrus, the Persian king who had defeated Babylon, issued a decree allowing all who wished to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple. We find this in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. However, the Samaritans were denied participation in the rebuilding project and generated so much opposition that work on the Temple ceased for about

fourteen years. Haggai and Zechariah tried to arouse their countrymen to take up the work again.

Zechariah was included in this study because of his emphasis on predictions with the Messianic hope. The prophecy in Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel “fits in” with Zechariah.

Wow – some of you are thinking. This is dull history stuff . . . the kind of thing I slept through in school. But we have to have a foundation. Because this isn't a history course, it's about the struggle for POWER. Everyone wants it – who's going to get control? Kind of like the remote for the TV. Each king wanted it – each nation wanted it – but God said, “I'm the one in control!!” The prophets warned . . . they suffered . . . but they also gave hope.

Some interesting statistics for you –
60% of Jeremiah is prophecy; 5% of Lamentations; 65% of Ezekiel; 45% of Daniel and 69% of Zechariah. 1,842 verses of prophecy in this study.

Jeremiah has wonderful pictures of Christ:
The spring of living water (2:13)
The righteous branch, coming shepherd in chapter 23
The new covenant in chapter 31
The redeemer in chapter 50

Both Ezekiel and Daniel were men of visions. We need to know their writings to help us understand the book of Revelation. Ezekiel saw

“wheels within a wheel,” the “dry bones,” he had details of the millennial temple. He was called to be a watchman for Israel.

Daniel chapters 1-6 are the story of a man of integrity. Don’t we need that in our leaders today? Don’t we appreciate a person of integrity from any walk of life? The fiery furnace and the lion’s den are familiar stories. In chapters 7-12 we have the prophecy of the 70 weeks. Our whole outlook on the tribulation period of seven years comes from Daniel.

Then Zechariah – another man of visions. What a prophecy in 12:10 – “the inhabitants of Jerusalem will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn . . .” He gives us the vivid description of Christ’s Second Coming . . . His feet standing on the Mount of Olives as it splits in two. Zechariah 14:9 “The Lord will be king over the whole earth!” Zechariah predicts more about the Messiah than any other prophet except Isaiah! What encouragement and hope!

I spoke briefly about my concern that we use good Bible hermeneutics as we study. The Bible is intended to communicate truth and, when we view it as a progressive revelation of God to man, it yields a doctrine which is harmonious, not contradictory. Personally, I favor a natural, literal reading. Taking it for what it says. So often in modern Bible study they pull a thread of truth here and one there and we unravel a beautifully knit blanket of truth and make it a confused heap of tangled yarn for ourselves.

This was brought home to me very forcefully this summer. I think God knowing that as I would be teaching prophecy this fall, I needed to be dead-sure of what I believed and why. Twenty or more years ago I had a dear, dear friend who was also a new Christian and she fell under legalistic, amillennial teaching and was convinced the only way to interpret the Bible was symbolically . . . spiritualize everything . . . Israel had become the church . . . Christ would never return to the earth again. What's more, anyone who didn't believe as she did was not a Christian and going to Hell. For twenty years I have prayed and read and studied and taught . . . forging out clearly in my own mind what is Truth and what is not. This summer I saw her again briefly and she gave me a book of prophecy – “See what you think of this.” I never read such trash in my life!

It's as though someone has taken an eggbeater to Scripture and jumbled it so badly you could never separate the white from the yoke, truth from falsehood. This book claims the Second Coming of Christ occurred at the fall of Jerusalem in 70. A.D. and, of course, it was spiritual, not literal. The time of Roman desecration was the tribulation period of Scripture. All Scripture has now been fulfilled and this earth will just roll on in its declining nature throughout eternity. No new heaven, no new earth. Is that sad or what??!!

The error of Hymenaeus is alive and well today. You remember him? Paul said in 2 Timothy 2:14-19, “Keep reminding them of these

things. Warn them before God against quarreling about words: it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen. Do you best to present yourselves to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some. Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: "The Lord knows those who are his," and "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness."

We want to correctly handle the Word of Truth. We want you to know the truth. There are many principles of Bible hermeneutics (again, that's the science of interpreting the Bible) and it's not my intent to cover all of them. But there are a few I'd like you to be aware of for this study.

1. Discrimination principle – makes a distinction where God makes a distinction; i.e., the difference between law and grace, faith and works, Israel and the church.
2. Predictive principle –
 - a. let the prophet give his own interpretation
 - b. facts in history may give interpretations

- c. other inspired Scriptures in the Bible may interpret the passage
- d. proper recognition of figures of speech
- e. recognition of types and symbols in Scriptures

3. Progressive mention principle – this is seen especially in the prophets in the sequence of events over and over. It's important when God restates it . . . even more so when God says it a third time!
4. Context principle – we need to use as broad a context as possible, consider the total Scripture.
5. Double reference principle – a passage applies to a person or event at hand and is used by the Holy Spirit at a later time in Scripture to apply to the person of Christ or the affairs of His kingdom.

Apocalyptic literature usually has a lot of symbols and visions. It is not an easy thing to understand or teach. We are not claiming that we have all the answers. Each one of the lecturers this year does diligent study in the Word and commentaries of learned writers. We desire to present to you a lesson that is clear and meaningful. Realistically, how many of you would study these books on your own? We want to guide you through them.

My last concern was that we not get bogged down in God's judgment and fail to see God's grace through the ages! Because we live on this side of the cross, it's sometimes hard for us to fully understand how black sin is. How offensive idolatry is to a holy God. How people could shake their fist in God's face and say, "No, I won't do it!"

We can barely comprehend living in this country, how vile the practices of the day were in the Old Testament. We see God judge them for that and see only His wrath. But His grace is ever so much greater. He warned, He pleaded, He was patient. I truly want us to see and appreciate that.

God's Word is ever fresh and inspiring. I've really been motivated anew with all the "good stuff" in these book as I've been preparing the lessons for this year. We'll read a lot, but it will be well worth it. We'll be reminded weekly that God is sovereign, God is good, and He gives us hope for the future.

Jeremiah was diligent to distribute God's Word for 40 years.

Ezekiel did let physical discomfort deter God's message.

Daniel's whole life is determination to display integrity.

Zechariah discloses the future –God given visions for tomorrow. It's exciting and you'll have a great "growth spurt" as you feed on the meat of God's Word. We'll look forward to seeing you next week.