

2021 Introductory Lecture
Carol Martin

You've all come to our study this year with expectations of learning, not only about the book of Revelation, but also about the overall subject of prophecy and how it fits into our world today. Like a complex jigsaw puzzle, we have to start with the edges . . . make a framework to guide us toward seeing God's overall plan.

Beyond the obvious reason that as Christians we should know our Bible thoroughly, why are we going to tackle something as formidable as prophecy?

First of all, prophecy is not only foretelling (predicting the future events), but also forth-telling (sharing what God's Word has already revealed about the future). Through the Scriptures God has foretold what was, what is, and what is to come . . . and we have been given the responsibility to share that knowledge with a lost world that is shackled to Satan. *John 8:32, Then you will know the truth, and truth will set you free.*

As we study prophecy, we are equipping ourselves to do just that . . . share with others what God has already determined is going to happen. Considering that only 4 out of the 27 books in the New Testament fail to mention Christ's Second Coming; and that one in every 30 verses mentions the Second Coming, the study of "last things" (called eschatology) is not optional for people who take the Bible seriously. It is not an epilogue to Christian theology (just something just tacked on to intrigue us) but it is a central thrust, a theme that permeates everything, that makes the gospel apply to everything, that makes sense of everything.

Jesus not only included predictions concerning the end of history in His teachings but, in fact, talked of little else. The end **is** coming and we must get reconciled with God. Therefore, we must realize that a focus on the "last things" is of ultimate importance to understanding our Christian faith.

I've told you this before, but when I first became sincerely interested in spiritual things, I was invited to a Bible Study and, since I didn't know anything about the Bible, I picked up a Living Bible paraphrase and read it through from cover to cover as you would a novel, determined not to stop for hard names, words or terms I didn't understand. The

objective was just to read and see what God had to say. Hopefully, so I could ask intelligent questions.

In that initial reading I determined with my own common sense and, no doubt, enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, the following:

1. God created earth and mankind; sin broke the fellowship they had together, but God had a plan for reconciliation.
2. The Jews were His chosen people through whom that reconciliation would come.
3. His Word could be taken literally as truth because what He said or promised came true.
4. God was always warning ahead of time what would happen as a result of disobedience.
5. Jesus was the Son of God and the expected Jewish Messiah.
6. Christ's death was the payment (atonement) for sin and my reconciliation with God (salvation) was by faith in what Jesus did (died on the cross for me), not my own good works.
7. The Jews were disobedient and set aside for a time while the church, composed of believing Jews and Gentiles, was sent forth to make disciples and bring them into the kingdom of God.
8. One day the church would be "caught up" - taken to heaven - raptured and a time of tribulation would come upon the earth.
9. There would be someone called the Antichrist, and during this tribulation period people would be required to take the mark of the beast (666) or die, and then a Second Coming of Christ with His saints to defeat the Antichrist.
10. Christ would establish a 1,000 year reign of peace on earth at the end of which would be a final battle and a Great White Throne judgment.
11. Lastly, for me personally, was the necessity to realize that I was what God said I was, a sinner. I needed to repent, be baptized, take a stand for Jesus and be faithful – trusting in His promise to never let me go.

Pretty good foundation, yes? Everything I've learned and studied since has built upon and confirmed that foundation.

I firmly believe you can understand the Bible. It's not necessary that we "have it all together" and can explain in detail every shade of meaning for each verse, but the basic plan of God for each of us and the world is very understandable.

Some have used the old slogan: God said it, I believe it, and that settles it. The truth of the matter is "God said it, and that settles it, whether I believe it or not." So our objective in this study is to help you know, "What does God say? What has God settled?"

The book of Daniel and the book of Revelation are the two primary examples in our Bible of what is called apocalyptic literature. They use many symbols and numbers that seem strange to us. That's why so many just throw up their hands with the attitude "it's impossible to understand." Daniel was told to "close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end." Jesus, however, instructed John in Revelation to "Write on a scroll what you see and hear and send it to the seven churches." The church is to know what's coming. So we want to guide you through these Scriptures – not shove some particular system of interpretation down your throat – but give you some insights and possible explanations.

A week ago, we were reminded that it was the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attack of terrorism. The United States went to war and our national awareness of terrorism increased. It seemed terrorism was plunging us even faster toward the tribulation period. Recent news has awakened us again that the danger of terrorism is still there. It's not only the world's condition that should concern us, but, sadly, we're seeing our own society slowly losing ground as our moral compass is compromised in so many areas.

No matter what media platform you use to stay up to date on world events, you know that chaos is at work. There are many prophecy programs and organizations that warn us about the conditions in the world today and the dangers we face, but that isn't the focus of our study. We want to know from Scripture what is in God's plan so we can recognize His hand as current events weave themselves toward what He has ordained.

Isaiah 46:9-11 states, *"Remember the former things from long past, for I am God, and there is no other. I am God and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, 'My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure' . . . Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it."*

It's true that we need to discern the times in which we live – to be aware of deception and false teachers because, you know, if you hear a lie often enough, it begins to be accepted as truth.

We need to be aware of the threat of religions that want to annihilate every Christian and stop the spread of the gospel – and be aware of the perversion of the gospel that focuses on social relevance instead of repentance. When we see these things happening, we know the time is near.

There are hundreds of books and several ministries who dig deeply into what current events mean in light of prophecy, and how this meeting / that conference / those political events fit into everything. We're not here to analyze that, but to help you see what Scripture says and let you draw your own conclusions.

Very often when pastors preach on the book of Revelation, they limit their presentations to the first three chapters known as the letters to the churches. In chapter 2, verse 4 Jesus had a charge to the church at Ephesus saying, "You have forsaken your first love." We can become so busy with good deeds and trying to lure the world inside the church with a comfortable, non-confrontive message, that our passion for saving lost souls and bringing them to Jesus can get watered down.

Englishman William Booth (founder of the Salvation Army) was a man of vision. He prophesied that much of the church would be preaching:

Christianity without Christ
 Forgiveness without repentance
 Salvation without regeneration
 Heaven without hell.

Have we arrived?

Like the watchman in Ezekiel 22:30 – we are responsible to warn . . . to stand in the gap with truth; to be the light in a dark place.

It's from Scripture that we learn what that truth is – what is to come – the consequences of disobedience and disbelief.

We become aware that we are running out of time – the rapture of the church could happen at any moment. Sure, there are “signs of the times” as Jesus made us aware of in the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24. And as we study, we'll become more aware of how the restoration of Israel to the land, and political unification of Europe with the introduction of the Euro, and the expanding acceptance of a cashless society, and the push to demand obedience without question from leadership broadens the prospect that we are racing toward the end. Prophecy is not written to scare us but to prepare us.

Before we can get into the book of Revelation (and that does not have an “s” on it) in January, we need some general background in prophecy. Our first eleven lessons will focus on that. It will form the framework we need to see the big picture, just as the picture on the box helps us solve a jigsaw puzzle. There is something else to consider: just as every great meal begins with a grocery list, to feast on prophecy we need some definitions. You'll find a sheet with those definitions included in your lesson packet.

We'll be spending some time guiding you through some Old Testament Scriptures. We need to know about the prophecies fulfilled in the first coming of Jesus. Those establish our confidence and hope in the literal fulfillment of future prophecies. In Isaiah we have prophecy for the suffering servant and the millennial kingdom; in Jeremiah for God's protection and restoration of His people; in Ezekiel for the Battle of Gog and Magog and the millennial temple; in Daniel for the timing of the 70 weeks that directly bear on the seven years of tribulation and the Antichrist; in Zechariah for the description of Christ's literal return to the earth; in Romans for God's plan for the Jews and then to Revelation for details of the Great Tribulation, the battle of Armageddon, and the victory of God over everything. Don't shy away if this sounds difficult – the Holy Spirit is a great teacher to guide us!

Whenever the subject of prophecy is presented there are some inherent dangers. Some people are just curious and want to have their ears tickled but not apply its lessons to their own lives; some would like to make prophetic interpretation a test of fellowship and think, well if you believe **that** then you can't be a Christian; or some become so enraptured with prophecy they become fanatic and will talk of little else.

But when we approach a study such as this with an open mind and a true desire to just know what God's Word says, we discover three things:

1) **Prophecy proves the authority of the Bible;** May 14, 2021 marked the 73rd anniversary of the independence of Israel. We should be moved with amazement as we read prophecies written centuries ago and realize we've seen them come to pass in our own lifetime. *Isaiah 66:8, Who has ever heard of such a thing? Who has ever seen such things? Can a country be born in a day or a nation be brought forth in a moment? Or Ezekiel 37:21-22, The Sovereign Lord says: I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back to their own land. I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel.*

Just as the Bible establishes that God is the true God, it also proves that God's Word is the true Word. The hundreds of prophecies that have come to pass exactly as the Bible has said prove that the Bible is the inspired Word of the sovereign Lord.

For example: Isaiah named King Cyrus of Persia more than 150 years before he was even born; Jeremiah prophesied Judah would go into Babylon captivity for 70 years, which they did, before King Cyrus allowed the captives to return.

More fulfilled prophecies about the Messiah are also in your packet.

2) **Prophecy reveals God's power, wisdom and His purposes.** The Bible isn't just full of interesting stories, it's the destiny of mankind. Since the Garden of Eden, God's purpose has been to reunite us to that intimate relationship with Him. Through the blood of His Son, Jesus, His power did what we could not do for ourselves – atone for our sins. *John 3:16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

The First Coming of Christ was not to condemn us, but save us. The Second Coming of Christ will be to judge the world. Prophecy helps us know that Jesus is really a grizzly bear, not a teddy bear.

3) Prophecy brings peace and security to believers and produces in God's children the desire for a holy life, wanting Him to conform us to the image of Jesus Christ. Bad people always think they're good enough, Christians know we're not good enough – we need the grace of God. The Holy Spirit begins to develop in us the fruit of the Spirit and helps us identify the gifts of the Spirit as we learn through the Scriptures how to have the mind of Christ.

Prophecy should be a real comfort for us. Whatever is wrong in our world today . . . in the end God wins!

There are three major views of prophecy and you'll be hearing about them throughout this study, but I just want to give you a very brief introduction. It should be noted that there are a myriad of books that discuss in depth each of these positions. They offer justification for their viewpoints and many are technical in terminology and aimed at the serious student of prophecy. That is not the purpose of this study. Again, we're here to give you the "big picture" of what God has to say about the future.

First of all, we have been in the last days since Jesus died. Every Christian should believe Jesus is coming again as He promised. The issues causing confusion and bringing about the concern of various viewpoints revolve around timing.

Millennium means 1,000 years. We'll read about it in Revelation 20. Will the Second Coming of Jesus be before or after the millennium? When will the rapture of the church take place – before, mid-way, or after the tribulation period? Will Jesus ever physically rule from Jerusalem? Has the church replaced Israel in God's plan?

So here are the basic tenets of the three main positions:

The Postmillennial position teaches that the current age is the millennium, which is not necessarily a literal thousand years. They look for a utopian state on earth to be brought about through the noble efforts of the church as the world is evangelized. During this "golden age" the church, not Israel, will receive the fulfillment of the promises to

Abraham and David. The kingdom will be on earth, but it will be a church kingdom, not a Jewish one, and the King (Christ) will be absent from the earth, not present on it; He rules in the hearts of His people. The Lord will return to earth at the end of this millennium period and there will be a general resurrection, destruction of this present creation and entry into the eternal state. This was the last major millennial position to develop and was popular during much of the nineteenth century.

The Amillennial position interprets the millennium spiritually (Ah meaning “no”). They teach that from the ascension of Christ in the first century until His Second Coming both good and evil will increase in the world as God’s kingdom parallels Satan’s kingdom. There is no rapture. Even though it believes that Satan is currently bound, it teaches that evil increases. When Jesus Christ returns, the end of the world will occur with a general resurrection and a general judgment of all people.

This view denies there will be any earthly millennial kingdom. The kingdom is now; it is heaven’s rule over the church. They also feel the promises concerning the land possession of Israel by Abraham’s descendants need not be fulfilled because the Jewish people broke the covenant by their disobedience to God. The only millennium we can expect, according to their viewpoint, is the rule of Christ, now in heaven, where He is seated on the throne of David. He will never step foot on this earth again. Amillennialism has been held by the Roman Catholic Church since the fourth century and is today the viewpoint of many of the mainline Protestant churches.

The third position is called the Premillennial position. It was the earliest of the three millennial systems to arise. It fell out of favor during the Middle Ages but was revived by the Puritans and other Protestants in the seventeenth century. This position sees the world made up of three kinds of people – the Jews (God’s chosen), the Gentiles (the unsaved), and the church of God (the saved Jew and Gentile). Christ will come to earth again literally and He Himself, not the church, will usher in the millennial kingdom. He will actually reign on earth as King, and during that time the Jewish people will experience the full blessing of the promises made to Abraham and David. After the

thousand years, there will be a resurrection of the dead and final judgment before creation of a new heaven and a new earth.

You always deserve to know which viewpoint a teacher is coming from. Obviously it will make a difference in their interpretation.

There is a golden rule of interpretation that says, "When plain sense makes common sense, seek no other sense." I believe you should take God's Word at its primary, normal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context clearly indicate otherwise. For example: Jesus said, "I am the door." We know He was not a literal door. He also said, "If I go away, I will come back and take you to be with Me." That's plain enough. God is not a God of confusion. Literal normal interpretation – considering that the Bible means what it says – will do a lot to help your understanding of prophetic passages.

As one of your lecturers, I teach from a premillennial position. I take the Word of God literally. That doesn't mean I have all the answers, but as will all the lecturers who present the lessons, we'll do our best to give you as much information as we can so you can draw your own conclusion.

Matthew Henry said, "The Scriptures were written, not to make us astronomers, but to make us saints." We're not to be focused on the Antichrist, but be looking for Jesus Christ.

One of the most important things about Bible prophecy is that it is meant to have an impact on the present. As it had meaning for those alive when it was written, so it continues to have a message to every generation until it is completely fulfilled. It should penetrate our lives and values now. It should cause us to change, to do something.

2 Peter 3:11 speaks of the elements being destroyed by heat; THEREFORE, "what sort of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming."

1 Thessalonians 4:17 speaks of living believers caught up with dead believers in the clouds to meet the Lord; THEREFORE, "encourage and comfort one another."

1 John 3:2,3 speaks of Christ's return; THEREFORE, "realize that one day we shall be like Him."

We need to keep a clear purpose in front of us as we study these prophetic passages. The purpose of prophecy is not to entertain the curious, but to encourage the consecrated. As it's written in *2 Peter 1:19, And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it.*

So we welcome you to this exciting study. Prepare yourselves to feast on God's Word, you'll be reading a lot of it. For those of you who have been in our past studies, you know we usually divide our lessons into a five day reading plan. However, the series this year will have a change in format. The questions just appear numerically and you can do them at your own pace. I suggest you answer four or five questions a day to give you time to really digest the Scriptures and let the Holy Spirit speak and instruct you. I can't emphasize enough that it's more important that you read the entire Scriptures given for each question, than how you answer them. We want you to see the context and keep the big picture in mind.

Our first eleven lessons are topical in nature covering a broad range of prophetic Scriptures. They will form a solid base as we dig into the book of Revelation verse by verse in January.

We're excited you're here and pray this will be a deeply encouraging study for you.