

We are finishing up our series on how to study your Bible today. We've covered:

Study tools, using the interpretation hourglass (context, structure, details, interpretation, application), basic principles for studying commands, stories, poetry, and now prophecy. I hope the illustrations have been helpful.

- Much of what I'll be teaching today comes from Louis Berkhof's little book, Principles of Biblical Interpretation.
- Prophecy is perhaps the hardest of all the genres to interpret and apply to ourselves. Our goal is still to find out what the original author intended as well as how the original audience interpreted what was given. But with prophecy, this becomes even more difficult because prophecy is often laced with symbols and other things that sometimes the original readers didn't even understand. So, how do we interpret these tough passages?
- Today, we'll be going over several things to remember as you look at a prophetic passage. By keeping these things in mind, you should be able to learn a lot more about God and what He is trying to teach you.
- One thing I'm going to mention a lot is the idea of letting scripture interpret scripture. Especially with prophecy, we have to be careful of letting our own ideas of what things mean interfere with what scripture is telling us. Scripture is the highest authority we have from God, so scripture must be our foundation for how we interpret scripture.

Books of Prophecy- Isaiah-Malachi in the OT, Revelation in the NT; but it is included in every major section of scripture in all of the Bible as we'll see in a few of our examples.

Types of Prophecy- Prophetic- words given to man to pass on; Apocalyptic- visions or symbols given to man to pass on

What Is Prophecy?

Defined: Berkhof defines prophecy as: *The proclamation of that which God revealed.*

i.e. God tells or reveals something to someone, and they tell it to others either in written form or spoken word. These revelations can explain past events, give clarity to what is happening at the present, or even predict what will come in the future

- Today we'll cover two areas to think about when it comes to prophecy, *special characteristics of prophetic literature & rules to use when interpreting prophecy*

I. Special Characteristics of Prophecy

1. Prophecy is organic

- If something is organic, it means it is changing, or growing. Prophecy isn't limited to predicting future facts as we mentioned earlier. Many times it speaks of general ideas of peace or judgment or prosperity that are coming. As more prophecy is added to the original prophecy, things become clearer and the thing that is being prophesied begins to take shape, like a flower blooming.

- Example: prophecies about the Messiah

Gen. 3:15 → Prophecy from Jacob about a scepter from Judah → a descendant of David who will rule forever → a suffering servant → the light of the world → riding on a donkey → born in Bethlehem. All of these build on one another and we see this prophecy of the Messiah growing into a clearer picture the more prophecies are added.

2. Prophecy has its own perspective

- Prophecy tends to see the big picture of events, rather than every minute detail. Remember, prophecy is a word from God on a particular topic. It is God taking His infinite knowledge and condensing it for the hearer. So we get prophecies about the "Day of the Lord" that encompass a ton of events even though the prophecy might not be very specific about those events.

Imagine explaining a mountain range at different times. Once you may talk about the whole thing, then a particular mountain, then you see it from a helicopter and describe a valley pool. It would be foolish to think that these contradicted each other because the first explanation described it as a group of mountains with no mention of a pool

- It can even be revealed through the perspective of the prophet by how they live. Berkhof writes, "Isaiah walked bare-footed through the streets of Jerusalem, Jeremiah hastened to the Euphrates [river] to hide his [belt], Ezekial lay 390 days on his left [side] and 40 days on his right [side symbolically] bearing the sins of the people, and Hosea married a wife of [prostitution]." All of these were to show what God was doing to and for the people of Israel.

3. Prophecies are often conditional

- This is not to say that all prophecies are conditional. Some teach that view and use it to explain away prophecies that aren't fulfilled, because they assume that some condition hasn't been met.

- A conditional prophecy is one that refers to an event that is happening soon, like an impending judgment on a city. There can even be conditions that are not stated. The most familiar example is from Jonah 3:4

Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

Jonah 3:4 (ESV)

- Notice, Jonah doesn't give them the option to repent, but we see that the actual judgment would only take place if they didn't repent.

- We see this as well with a judgment pronounced against king Ahab for stealing Naboth's vineyard. God said he would not only destroy Ahab, but all of his house. When Ahab tore his robes and repented, God said:

²⁹ "Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring the disaster in his days; but in his son's days I will bring the disaster upon his house."

1 Kings 21:29 (ESV)

- So we see that some prophecies are simply warnings from God of what will happen if things continue the way they are going. Even if the condition of repentance isn't mentioned, it is often the case that when people repented, God also withheld the judgment that was prophesied.

4. Prophecies should be taken factually

- We need to take the prophets at their word unless scripture tells us otherwise. When Joel prophesies about locusts coming and eating all the crops, we should interpret that as locusts coming to eat all the crops. We shouldn't assume that just because we can't comprehend something happening like the prophet is saying actually taking place or it being scientifically impossible that it can't happen just as the prophet says.

- But, often scripture does interpret a prophecy for us so we don't have to wonder what this all means.

"I raised my eyes and saw, and behold, a ram standing on the bank of the canal. It had two horns, and both horns were high, but one was higher than the other, and the higher one

came up last. ⁴ I saw the ram charging westward and northward and southward. No beast could stand before him, and there was no one who could rescue from his power. He did as he pleased and became great. ⁵ As I was considering, behold, a male goat came from the west across the face of the whole earth, without touching the ground. And the goat had a conspicuous horn between his eyes. ⁶ He came to the ram with the two horns, which I had seen standing on the bank of the canal, and he ran at him in his powerful wrath. ⁷ I saw him come close to the ram, and he was enraged against him and struck the ram and broke his two horns.

Dan 8:3-7 (ESV)

- Pretty strange, and pretty hard to imagine this actually taking place...

He said, "Behold, I will make known to you what shall be at the latter end of the indignation, for it refers to the appointed time of the end. ²⁰ As for the ram that you saw with the two horns, these are the kings of Media and Persia. ²¹ And the goat is the king of Greece. And the great horn between his eyes is the first king.

Dan 8:19-21 (ESV)

- But, as a rule, prophecy should be taken literally unless scripture itself gives us a good reason not to.*

5. Prophecy should be taken in context

- We have to consider that the context of a particular prophecy can change over time. There are details that are given for particular prophecies that might fall off or change throughout the passage of time, but again, we must have a good scriptural reason to believe this. Here is an example:

- The Return of Elijah*

"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. ⁶ And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."

Mal 4:5-6 (ESV)

A simple, literal reading of this tells us that before the "Day of the Lord" comes, Elijah will return. Has this happened yet? Has Elijah come?

- The NT Interprets the Old*

John 1:19-21 And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰ He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." ²¹ And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not."

- So John denies that he was some kind of reincarnation of Elijah, he is John the Baptist

- We have the appearance of Elijah and Moses on a mountain in Mark 9, and after that the disciples ask Christ about this very passage in Malachi.

Mark 9:11-13 And they asked him, "Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?"

¹² And he said to them, "Elijah does come first to restore all things. And how is it written of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt? ¹³ But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him."

Matt 11:7-15 As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John:

"What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸ What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. ⁹ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is he of whom it is written,

" ' Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you. (Malachi 3)'

¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, ¹⁴ and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. ¹⁵ He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

- So, John says he is not Elijah, but Christ says that he is...

Luke 1:16-17 ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

- The original prophecy has melded into something very different than what most expected it to look like. The context has changed, and the fulfillment has changed to fit the context. But again, we can't do this with any prophecy we want, we have to let scripture make that call for us.

II. Rules for Interpreting Prophecy

1. Take things literally unless you're not supposed to

- Again, these are actual words given to us from the prophets. Unless we have a specific word from scripture, or at least a very good example from scripture, we should take things literally. I've already given you an example from Daniel. Here is an example from Matthew 24

Matt 24:29 "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

- Now a prophecy from Isaiah concerning the fall of Babylon

Isaiah 13:9-10 Behold, the day of the Lord comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it. ¹⁰ For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light.

- The fall of Babylon took place almost 3000 years ago, so did these things happen then, and will happen again? It is enough to make us curious. That brings us to number two

2. Look for the basic idea

- Every prophecy has a basic idea behind it, whether it is peace, suffering, war, wrath, a coming empire or king, or Christ's 1st or 2nd coming. We need to find the fundamental idea behind the passage, and that will help us move the passage beyond just the physical things that are happening to the spiritual truth that is being expressed. The point of Isaiah saying that

Isaiah 11:6 The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them.

-is to say that there is a time of great peace coming, not so much that very strange events are coming.

3. Prophecy should be read in light of its fulfillment

- In the vein of letting scripture interpret scripture, we should always read prophecy in light of its fulfillment. Often times as you read a good study bible or a bible with cross-references, you'll see some NT passages referenced in the margins of an OT prophecy. This refers to its fulfillment later in scripture.

- To get familiar with all of the prophecy that has been fulfilled, we simply have to read our bibles and be familiar with them. When you are reading through the gospels and you see the phrase, “this was to fulfill what was said in...” go and look up that passage, mark it so that when you read through that OT book, you’ll know exactly what the prophet meant.

- Prophecy can be extremely difficult to gain application out of, but I hope that using some of these rules, you’ll be able to get a bit more out of what you are reading.

Questions