

# ESCHATOLOGY: DOCTRINE OF LAST THINGS

## PART 16

### THE DOCTRINE OF PROPHECY

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We are going to examine specific Old Testament prophecies concerning the Kingdom, but before we examine specific prophetic Scriptures, we need to define prophecy and understand it as a doctrine in general. It is the responsibility of every believer to understand God's plan for the ages as He has articulated it in the Bible. That's why I have so heavily emphasized hermeneutics in terms of understanding Eschatology. Chafer has some strong words for those who fail to study Eschatology and even stronger words for those who abuse, misuse, and incorrectly teach these Scriptures.

"Since prediction is incorporated into the Sacred Text to such a large degree and since the preacher is appointed to declare the whole counsel of God, there is no escaping the responsibility of knowing and expounding the prophetic Scriptures. Let the one who avoids this great theme in his pulpit ministrations ask himself what his relation to the Holy Spirit is, in view of the truth asserted by Christ that the primary teaching of the Spirit is to 'shew you things to come' (John 16:13). The pastor and teacher is a specialist in the knowledge of the Word of God and there is no intimation that the declaration of prophecy is excepted from his responsibility. ... There is no proper approach to the Synoptic Gospels other than to see them as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prediction regarding the Messiah. Similarly, the book of Revelation is the terminal wherein like trunk lines running into a union station, the highways of Biblical prophecy come to an end. The Bible presupposes that the reader, when reaching the last book of the Bible, will have in mind all that has gone before, and, to the same degree, these highways of prophecy are incomplete until traced to their end in that incomparable prophetic book. This serves to emphasize the truth that the whole Bible in all its parts is an interrelated and interdependent message, and that the student who does not have as clear a grasp of prophecy as he has of other features of revelation is, by so much, disqualified to interpret the Word of God." [Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, p. 4:260].

It is abhorrent that any pastor, teacher, or theologian would subordinate prophetic truth to theology and/or personal preferences in violation of a literal understanding of prophetic passages in the Bible and thereby lead people away from the truth instead of to the truth. This is equally true whether referring to Israel, the biblical covenants, the prophecies of the Old Testament, the Messianic and Kingdom truth of the Synoptic Gospels, New Testament prophecy, and the book of Revelation. All of these areas of theology are abused, misused, and even deliberately denied or distorted in order to maintain particular theological positions. It is the responsibility of each one of us to seek out biblical truth in these areas. In the past, I have quoted a number of Reformed theologians who admit that a literal reading of Scripture results in a premillennial, pretribula-

tional rapture understanding of the End Times. To proceed then and deny that truth because it does not comport with one's theology is to engage in rebellion and as a teacher it is to subject one's self to a stricter judgment from the Lord at the judgment seat of Christ. Since so many teachers fail to study prophecy much less properly understand it, and even subvert the plain written Word, they exhibit a low view of Scripture not only in their hermeneutics but also in their cavalier disregard for the truth of prophecy and for their seeming disdain for the warning of James 3:1.

James 3:1 <sup>1</sup>Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.

When we examine prophecy according to literal hermeneutics, it is apparent that the fulfillment of the biblical covenants is at least a major part of the story of biblical prophecy. We know that all the prophecies that have come to pass were fulfilled exactly as the Bible predicted they would be fulfilled. That is, according to literal hermeneutics as understood by reading the Bible considering its natural, contextual, historical, and grammatical senses. Therefore, it is completely reasonable to conclude, according to literal hermeneutics, that all the prophecy the Bible records that has yet to be fulfilled will be fulfilled exactly as written. Chafer called it "unreasonable and unbelieving" [Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, p. 288] to suppose that unfulfilled prophecy must be spiritualized or allegorized or otherwise denied a literal fulfillment at some point in the future.

Dispensationalists see a lot of discontinuity between Israel and the church but we also recognize the harmony that exists between the Old Testament and the New Testament as those dispensationally distinct parts of the Bible present the unfolding realization of God's plan for history. "Darby viewed Scripture as 'a harmonious whole', believing that the authority of the Old Testament was 'so interwoven with the whole text and substance of the New Testament that if it goes the New goes with it'. The New Testament was 'in every thought' based on the Old, and unintelligible without it. Although 'a new foundation' for man's relationship with God had been laid in Christ, there yet remained a continuity in God's purposes, which Darby likened to 'a thread by which another state of things, the millennial state, is connected with the whole of God's dealings' with Israel. God, in Christ, had not instituted 'a wholly new system', for the One who had spoken through His prophets had now spoken, without contradiction, in the Person of His Son (Heb. 1:1-2). Although Calvary had made 'an impassable gulf between the Old and New', the New Testament 'confirmed and adopted' the Old just as the Old had 'predicted and prepared the way' for the New. According to Darby, one of the most significant ways in which the New Testament had confirmed and adopted the Old was in relation to God's promises to Israel." [Paul Richard Wilkinson, *For Zion's Sake: Christian Zionism and the Role of John Nelson Darby*, pp. 108-109]. Hasn't Darby's warning come to pass? As theologians have replaced Israel with the church, placed the church back into the previous dispensations, and reinterpreted the Old Testament with the New Testament, they have completely destroyed any proper understanding of God's plan for history. That is exactly what we observe concerning most of what is taught to Christians

today. We can only properly understand the implications of prophecy for this dispensation and what will follow when we allow the Old Testament to speak for itself.

One thing to keep in mind concerning the older dispensationalists including Darby, Scofield, and Chafer is they held to an extreme division between the heavenly as exemplified by the church and the earthly as exemplified by Israel. Certainly, there is much truth to that dichotomy, but they are overdoing that a bit.

“This distinction between Israel as the earthly people of God, and the Church as the heavenly people of God, is foundational to Darby’s eschatology and was, in his mind, ‘the hinge upon which the subject and the understanding of Scripture turns.’ It would prove to be ‘the mainspring’ of his thought.” [Paul Richard Wilkinson, *For Zion’s Sake: Christian Zionism and the Role of John Nelson Darby*, p. 102]. I suspect part of Darby’s problem was his abhorrence of Replacement Theology. Of course, he was correct concerning that issue. He knew that mixing Israel and the church led only to misunderstanding and denying biblical truth. Darby’s belief was those who are in Christ should not get involved in things of this world. He was adamant that Christians should not be involved in politics and that even included refraining from voting in political elections. That’s how much of a dichotomy Darby saw between the heavenly reality of Christians and the things of this world that do not belong to those who are in Christ.

Chafer said that prophecy introduces “the realization of the two divine purposes—the earthly purpose centered in Israel and consummated according to Psalm 2:6, and the heavenly purpose centered in the Church and consummated according to Hebrews 2:10.” [Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, p. 288]. Ryrie, Pentecost, Walvoord, and other dispensational theologians that followed these early dispensational theologians have softened, but not eliminated, this sharp distinction between the heavenly church and the earthly Israel.

The Old Testament prophets were men used by God to speak to the nation of Israel. Their prophecies were of two types. One was specific to the nation in the time period at hand. The other type of prophecy concerned Israel’s divinely ordained purpose for the future. Replacement Theology recognizes the first type and uses literal hermeneutics to understand it, but that theology completely destroys the second type concerning Israel’s future. Prophecy, the King, and the Kingdom can only be understood when the role of Israel in God’s plan for history is properly understood.

“It is necessary to keep this Israelitish character of the prophet in mind. Usually his predictive [prophecy] ... has in view the covenant people, their sin and failure, and their glorious future. The Gentile is mentioned as used for the chastisement of Israel, as judged therefor, but also as sharing the grace that is yet to be shown toward Israel. The Church, corporately, is not in the vision of the O.T. prophet. The future blessing of Israel as a nation rests upon the Palestinian [better, Land] Covenant of restoration and conversion, and the Davidic Covenant of the Kingship of the Messiah, David’s Son, and this

gives to predictive prophecy its Messianic character. The exaltation of Israel is secured in the kingdom, and the kingdom takes its power to bless from the Person of the King, David's Son ... Speaking broadly then, *predictive* prophecy is occupied with the fulfillment of the Palestinian and Davidic Covenants; the Abrahamic Covenant having also its place." [C. I. Scofield, the Reader's Edition of the original *Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 711]. Scofield and the older dispensationalists call the Land Covenant the Palestinian Covenant but there is no such land as Palestine. That name was imposed on the region by the Romans after the Jewish revolts and the name is derived from the Philistines. The Romans imposed this name in order to try and erase any memory of the Jewish nation in the land.

The prophetic books of the Old Testament may be divided as follows: the pre-exilic prophets concerning Judah were Isaiah, Jeremiah, Joel, Obadiah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah and concerning Israel they were Hosea, Amos, and Jonah. The exilic prophets were Ezekiel and Daniel. The post-exilic prophets concerning Judah (Israel was no longer in existence as a nation) were Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. The concept of dividing the Old Testament prophets into major and minor prophets is not helpful. They all equally present biblical truth.

Scofield presented what he calls the "keys which unlock the meanings of prophecy." First, is properly understanding the two advents of Messiah. The First Advent for the purpose of suffering and the Second Advent for the purpose of reigning over the Messianic Kingdom. The second key is the doctrine of the remnant. There has always been a remnant of Jewish believers. Third, the doctrine of the Day of the Lord. Fourth, the doctrine of the Kingdom. The key chapters in the Bible concerning prophecy are Deuteronomy 28-30, Psalm 2, and Daniel 2 and 7. [C. I. Scofield, the Reader's Edition of the original *Scofield Reference Bible*, pp. 711-712].

Deuteronomy 28 presents the blessings for obedience and the curses for disobedience to Israel that characterize the history of the nation up to the diaspora. Deuteronomy 29 continues to describe the curses and the reasons for it. Deuteronomy 30:1-14, the Land Covenant, promises restoration in the land. The New Covenant is also hinted at in 30:6. Psalm 2 records the installation of the Lord's Anointed as His King. Daniel 2 predicts the times of the Gentile kingdoms culminating in the Kingdom of God. Daniel 7 also relates to the Gentile Kingdoms but this time in the form of horrifying beasts. It also reveals the Ancient of Days on His heavenly throne and the presentation of the Son of Man who will be given dominion to reign. This chapter also provides a glimpse of the Tribulation.

The early church was chiliastic or premillennial in its thinking until Augustine. We've already discussed how the dualism of Greek philosophy—heavenly and spiritual is good while earthly and material is bad—and pagan Manichaeism drove him to denying a literal Kingdom. Peters has an extensive list of early church fathers from the first three centuries that were premillennial in their theology. [George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic*

*Kingdom*, prop. 75, obs. 13, pp. 1:494-498]. Peters declares the early church was premillennial based on the testimony of the apostles.

“Our doctrine is traced *continuously* from the Apostles themselves, seeing that the first Fathers, who present Millenarian views, saw and conversed either with the Apostles or the Elders following them. So extensively, so generally was Chiliasm perpetuated, that Justin Martyr *positively asserts that all the orthodox* adopted and upheld it. Justin’s language is explicit (*Dial. With Trypho*, sec. 2); for after stating the Chiliastic doctrine, he asserts: ‘it to be *thoroughly proved* that it will come to pass. But I have also signified unto thee, on the other hand, that many—even those of that race of Christians *who follow not godly and pure doctrine—do not acknowledge it*. For I have demonstrated to thee, that these are indeed *called* Christians; but are atheists and impious heretics, because that in all things they teach what is blasphemous, and ungodly, and unsound,’ etc. He adds: ‘But I and whatsoever Christians *are orthodox in all things* do know that there will be a resurrection of the flesh, and a thousand years in the city of Jerusalem, built, adorned and enlarged according as Ezekiel, Isaiah, and other prophets have promised. ... Moreover, a certain man among us, whose name is *John, being one of the twelve apostles of Christ*, in that revelation which was shown to him prophesied, that those who believe in our Christ shall fulfill a thousand years at Jerusalem; and *after that* the general and, in a word, the everlasting resurrection...” [George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, prop. 75, obs. 1, p. 1:480]. Justin Martyr (100-165 A.D.) reportedly came to faith at Ephesus which means he certainly spoke to people who sat under the teaching of the Apostle John. It is interesting to note this early church theologian calls those who are not premillennial “atheists and impious heretics.”

Some theologians claim prophets are operating today. We don’t believe that. We believe revelation from God has ceased and the canon of Scripture is closed; therefore, prophets are not needed. Charismatics and Pentecostals believe that God is speaking to individuals today and that every person can seek after and obtain the gift of prophecy although some of them will say that not everyone will be gifted to be a prophet.

Other theologians who otherwise believe the revelatory gifts have ceased to operate, do believe there is a definition applicable to prophecy that is in operation today. They claim that anyone who proclaims the truth of God’s Word already revealed is a prophet. This is referred to as forthtelling as opposed to predictive foretelling of future events. No one is receiving a revelatory word from God today. Instead, we are proclaiming the Word “which was once for all handed down to the saints” (Jude 2) but that is properly characterized as a teaching gift in the church.

Chafer disagrees with my assessment of prophecy today. He believes the prophets in the church have a forthtelling ministry but not a foretelling ministry. His reasoning seems to be a bit inconsistent. He uses three Scriptures to justify his position. [Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, p. 4:286].

1 Corinthians 14:3 <sup>3</sup>But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation.

Ephesians 4:11 <sup>11</sup>And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers,

Ephesians 2:20 <sup>20</sup>having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone,

No one denies that prophecy was part of the process in the founding of the church during the transitional period after the Resurrection as were other revelatory and sign gifts that themselves are no longer operative. Chafer would agree that once the foundation is laid, the ministry of building that foundation is complete and ceases to function because the focus turns to building the superstructure on the foundation. Once built, the foundation cannot be added to or modified. In both Ephesians passages, apostles are mentioned alongside prophets and Chafer would never argue that the office of an apostle is active in the church today. It is not out of the question that as the office of apostle has served its function and is now done away, that the same situation applies to the early church prophets and that office is no longer necessary. The prophet's ministry was completed and was no longer needed. The early prophets obviously did edify, exhort, and comfort the early church but that ministry passed from them to the pastors and the teachers who are assigned the task of building the church on the foundation and that is the situation today. At least, that's how I, as a cessationist, see it.

Dr. Hoehner agrees that prophets as part of the foundation are not active in the church today. "The words could be translated, 'the foundation which consists of the apostles and prophets.' This makes the best sense when one sees in [Ephesians] 4:11 that the apostles and prophets were gifted men given to the church as its 'foundation.' Furthermore, this fits well in the present context, which states that Christ Jesus Himself is the chief cornerstone, that is, He is part of the foundation. In ancient building practices 'the chief cornerstone' was carefully placed. It was crucial because the entire building was lined up with it. The church's foundation, that is, the apostles and prophets, needed to be correctly aligned with [the chief cornerstone] Christ. All other believers are built on that foundation, measuring their lives with Christ. ... They [prophets] probably revealed God's will to the church when the biblical canon was incomplete. Since the apostles and prophets were foundational they did not exist after the first generation of believers." [Harold W. Hoehner, "Ephesians" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, pp. 627, 635].

Wiersbe concurs with Hoehner. "We commonly associate a prophet with predictions of future events, but this is not his primary function. A New Testament prophet is one who proclaims the Word of God. Believers in the New Testament churches did not possess Bibles, nor was the New Testament written and completed. How, then, would these local assemblies discover God's will? His Spirit would share God's truth with those possessing the gift of prophecy. Paul suggests that the that the gift of prophecy had to do with understanding 'all mysteries and all knowledge,' meaning, of course, spiritual

truths. The purpose of prophecy is 'edification, encouragement, and consolation.' Christians today do not get their spiritual knowledge *immediately* from the Holy Spirit, but *mediately* through the Spirit teaching the Word. With the Apostles, the prophets had a foundational ministry in the early church and they are not needed today." [Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, p. 2:37].

It's true that biblical prophets, Old Testament and New Testament, proclaimed the Word of God, called forthtelling, but the Word they were proclaiming was specific revelation from God that was meant by God to become part of the revealed Word of God, if it wasn't already. Forthtelling also involved the reiteration of already revealed truth. Foretelling is revealing God's revelation about the future. Prophets of God did both.

Prophets were people, primarily men, who spoke for God. They were given specific messages by God as representatives of God to the people. True prophets were divinely enabled to receive prophecies from God and they spoke with the authority of God. They were called by God, accountable to God, and empowered by God.

The majority of people today who claim to be prophets are found in the Charismatic/Pentecostal wings of churchianity. They are, however, prophets with a caveat. They know (at least some of them admit they know) they are not hearing a word from God so they hedge their theology by claiming that those who are prophets today are not perfect and can proclaim prophecies that do not come true. Peter Wagner says that "Scripture is infallible; prophets today are not." [C. Peter Wagner, *The Third Wave of the Holy Spirit: Encountering the Power of Signs and Wonders*, p. 107]. Wayne Grudem wrote a book about prophecy in the church today and he differentiates between apostolic prophecy which is prophecy received from God and the "ordinary" prophecy received by believers today. Prophecy that is received today is diminished in authority compared to apostolic prophecy. "On the one hand, there is 'apostolic' prophecy, with absolute divine authority in the actual words used. ... On the other hand, there is 'ordinary congregational prophecy,' prophecy for which no absolute divine authority is indicated. ... [T]here is almost uniform testimony [from all sections of the charismatic movement that prophecy is imperfect and impure, and will contain elements which are not to be obeyed or trusted." [Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, p. 110]. Yet, these theologians claim whatever prophecy they proclaim is received from God; they don't hedge when they are proclaiming it. Wagner defines the "gift of prophecy [as] the special ability that God gives to certain members of the body of Christ to receive and communicate an immediate message of God to His people through a divinely anointed utterance." [Wagner, p. 106].

Can prophecy be fallible and inaccurate? There are no orthodox theological resources that confirm the Charismatic understanding of prophecy as it exists in their theology today. "Prophecy assumes the reality of supernatural revelation from God." [Campbell, Johnston, Walvoord, & Witmer, *The Theological Wordbook*, p. 281]. Prophecy "primarily denotes an authoritative speaking for God." [William D. Mounce, *Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old & New Testament Words*, p. 543]. "The originality of biblical prophecy derives from the phenomenon of inspiration. ... [T]he biblical prophet is not a magician. He does not force God. On the contrary, he is under divine restraint. It is God

who invites, summons, and impels him... By inspiration God speaks to the [prophet], who has to transmit exactly what he receives. ...The Bible depicts the mechanism of inspiration as the act by which God puts words in the mouth of the sacred writers." [Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 960]. It would be good for Christianity if the so-called prophets of today exercised "divine restraint." There is nothing in the orthodox understanding of prophecy that would agree that prophecy today can be fallible and incorrect.

If prophecy is something received from God and it is a "divinely anointed utterance" as Wagner refers to it, how can it ever be mistaken? Prophecy is the product of inspiration and as such it cannot be in error. Ever. Why would anyone ever listen to some so-called prophet if what he says may be "imperfect and impure, and will contain elements that are not to be obeyed or trusted" as Grudem put it? It would be foolish to listen to such a person. All too many people today do listen to these people, and they are led away from the truth of the Word of God as a result.

A false prophet is one of those people "who falsely claim to utter revelations that come from God, to foretell future events, or to have God's power to produce miracles, signs, and wonders. In the Bible, false prophets fell into three general categories: (1) those who worshiped false gods and served idols; (2) those who falsely claimed to receive messages from the Lord; and (3) those who wandered from the truth and ceased to be true prophets." [Ronald F. Youngblood, *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, p. 395].

The Lord and the Bible both have something to say about false prophets. Jesus warned the Jewish people about the false prophets who were leading them away from instead of into the Kingdom. The truth concerning false prophets is no less applicable within the body of Christ today. Paul made that very application for the church to the elders at Ephesus.

Matthew 7:15–23 <sup>15</sup>"Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. <sup>16</sup>"You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? <sup>17</sup>"So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. <sup>18</sup>"A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. <sup>19</sup>"Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup>"So then, you will know them by their fruits. <sup>21</sup>"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. <sup>22</sup>"Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' <sup>23</sup>"And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.'

Acts 20:29 <sup>29</sup>"I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock;



The Lord also said that people will speak well of false prophets implying that people will willingly follow them and be deceived just as the Jewish fathers did before Christ's First Advent.

Luke 6:26 <sup>26</sup>“Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for their fathers used to treat the false prophets in the same way.

Jesus also warned the Jews that in the Time of Jacob's Trouble, false prophets would arise who would be very convincing and lead many people astray. Even believers can fall for the lies of false prophets and teachers and be led to ruin. They cannot lose their salvation but they can certainly be rendered useless in their sanctification. That is very evident today.

Matthew 24:11, 24 <sup>11</sup>“Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many. ... <sup>24</sup>“For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect.

Peter and John both warned their flocks to beware of false prophets.

2 Peter 2:1 <sup>1</sup>But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves.

1 John 4:1 <sup>1</sup>Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

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