

Christ in Prophecy
Prophecy 8: “The Interpretation of Bible Prophecy”

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Opening

Dr. Reagan: Have you ever wondered why there are so many different interpretations of end time Bible prophecy? How in the world can Christians read the same Scriptures and come to such different conclusions as to what they mean? Is someone taking the wrong approach? And if so, what is the right approach to the understanding of God's prophetic word?

Program

Dr. Reagan: Greetings in the name of Jesus our blessed hope and welcome to Christ in Prophecy. This is the fourth in a series of programs on the fundamentals of Bible prophecy. In our first program we took a look at the way Bible prophecy has been ignored and the many ways in which it has been abused. The Scripture that comes to mind in reference to that program is 1 Thessalonians 5:20 which says, "Do not treat prophecies with contempt." In our second program, we examined the importance of prophecy and we concluded that there are many reasons why every Christian should be interested in studying God's prophetic Word. The Scripture that I think of in reference to that program is 2 Peter 1:19 which encourages us to pay attention to prophecy because it is like a light shining in a dark place. Our third program focused on the variety of Bible prophecy. We saw that God used a very diverse group of people to serve as His prophets, young and old, rich and poor, sophisticated and uneducated. He then communicated with these people in diverse ways, through dreams, visions, angels, and words of knowledge. And the prophets themselves proclaimed their messages in diverse ways. We have written prophecy and oral prophecy, active prophecy and symbolic prophecy. And the theme verse for that program was Hebrews 1:1 where it says that, "Long ago at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets." This week we're going to take a look at the interpretation of Bible prophecy and hopefully you will come away from this program absolutely convinced that God's prophetic Word is not impossible to understand.

My topic for this session is the interpretation of Bible prophecy. I grew up in a church that really didn't believe in end time Bible prophecy. It's amazing that I'm a Bible prophecy teacher it's a miracle of God. Because I grew up in a church where the only sermon I ever heard about Bible prophecy was one that stated that there is not one, not one verse in the Bible that even implies that Jesus will ever put His feet on this earth again. I heard that statement over and over and over. Well, when I was about 12 years old I was flipping through the Bible one day, this really happened, I was just flipping through. And we didn't ever study the Old Testament. But I had a whole Bible and I was flipping through it and I just happened to open it to Zechariah 14, and I started reading it. And I was absolutely amazed at what I read. I was only 12 years old but I could understand what it said. You see, Zechariah 14 not only implies that Jesus Christ is going to come back and put His foot on this earth, it says so point blank.

Let me give you a summary of what Zechariah 14 says. Behold a day is coming for the Lord when I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle. Then the Lord will go forth and fight against those nations and in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives and the Lord will become king over all the earth. I read that and read that and I shook my head and I just could not believe what I was reading because every sermon I had ever heard about the end times said He was never coming back, never gonna put His foot on this earth again. And certainly was never going to reign in a rule of majesty over this earth. And here it was Zechariah 14, seeming to say exactly the opposite. So I began to ask myself, "What in the world does Zechariah 14:1-9, mean?" Does it mean what it says or does it mean something else? And finally, after several weeks of wondering I made an appointment to see my pastor. I went to him in fear and trembling. I sat down and I said, "Pastor, you know you always say there's not one verse in the Bible that even implies Jesus will ever put His foot on the earth again." He said, "That's right son." I said, "Well what about this?" And I handed it to him. And I'll never forget, he sat there and he read it and he read it and he read it. I thought he was never going to say anything. I don't think he had ever seen that passage before. And he kept reading it and reading it and finally he looked up and he put his finger in my face and he said, "Son I wanna tell you something. I don't know what this passage means, but I'll guarantee you one thing, it does not mean what it says." Well, it didn't mean what it said because it didn't agree with his preconceived idea. And for me that was unacceptable. Because I

had been taught since the time I was born that the Bible was the Word of God and the Bible says what it means and means what it says. That preacher... in fact, our church had a very unusual position. Our church took the position that the Bible means exactly what it says from beginning to end unless it's talking about the Second Coming of Jesus in which case it never means what it says. Well that just didn't make any sense to me. Every time after that we would have a visiting evangelist come and he would get up and say, "There's not one verse in the Bible that even implies Jesus would ever put His foot on the earth again." I'd go up and I'd say, "What about Zechariah 14?" And they'd look and they'd look and they'd say, "Doesn't mean what it says."

Well, this went on until I was about nineteen. When I was about nineteen we had a guy come who had a seminary education. Now back in those days that was very unusual, particularly in the church I grew up in. You just didn't have anybody that went to seminary. This guy had a seminary education, he was highly educated and he got up and made that same statement. "There is not one verse in the Bible that even implies Jesus will ever put His feet on his earth again." I went up to him afterwards scared to death, I said, "Sir, what about Zechariah 14?" He didn't even have to read it, he knew it. He said, "Let me tell you about Zechariah 14 son, it doesn't mean what it says." I said "Why?" he said, "Because it is apocalyptic!" Well I tell you the truth, it just scared me to death, scared me to death. I didn't know if that was a disease or if that was a philosophy or a theology or what it was but he was seminary educated therefore he knew what he was talking about and so guess what? When I started preaching, I would get up and I would say, "There is not one verse in the Bible that even implies Jesus will ever put his feet on the earth again." And when some little old lady in tennis shoes would come up and say, "What about Zechariah 14?" I would yell, "Apocalyptic!" And she'd run for the door and I'd grin and she didn't know what I was talking about. I didn't know what I was talking about, but all God's children were happy. And that was the way I handled it for a long time, until one day I did something that I hadn't done before in my life. I sat down one day and I read the entire book of Zechariah, it only took a few minutes, it's a very short book, one of those so-called "minor" prophets. And as I was reading that book, I noticed something very, very interesting. This book, this apocalyptic book, contains many First Coming prophecies. And every one of them meant what they said. Here I was so... because the book's apocalyptic, never means what it says, yet it has all these first coming prophecies and they all meant what they said. For example, it says the Messiah

will come on a donkey. It says He will be hailed as a king. It says He will be betrayed, that He will be betrayed by a friend. That He will be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver. It even goes on to say that the thirty pieces of silver will be used to buy a potter's field. It says that he will be lifted up. It says He will be pierced. Now folks you don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out that if the First Coming prophecies meant what they said, the Second Coming prophecies in the same book must mean what they say. Regardless of whether you're gonna call it apocalyptic or not. They mean what they say.

That day I stopped playing games with the Word of God. That day was a revolutionary day in my life. I started accepting the Bible for its plain sense meaning from the beginning to the end. I accepted what I call the golden rule of interpretation, that if the plain sense makes sense, don't look for any other sense or you will end up with nonsense. Just accept it for its plain sense meaning. That does not always mean the literal meaning but the plain sense meaning, even when you're talking about symbols.

Let me give you a classic example of the nonsense way of interpreting Scripture. It is found in this book by Loraine Boettner called the *Millennium*. Loraine Boettner is dead now but this book was a book that he wrote early in the 20th century. It was a book in which he tried to spiritualize everything that the Bible says about the end times, and when he got to Zechariah 14 I could hardly believe my eyes. Now this is a classic example of spiritualization and here's what he said, "Zechariah 14 says that in the end times that when the city of Jerusalem is about to fall, the Antichrist is about to conquer, that the Lord will come back to the Mount of Olives. His feet will touch the mountain, it will split in half He will speak a supernatural word, the Antichrist's forces will be destroyed, and on that day He'll become king over all the earth." But he said, "It doesn't mean that." He said, "What it really means is this: the Mount of Olives stands for the human heart. The enemy forces around Jerusalem stand for the attack of Satan on the human heart. When you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior He comes into your life, He stands on your Mount of Olives, your heart breaks in contrition and repentance and on that day the enemy forces are defeated and Jesus becomes king of your heart." Can you believe that? This is what I mean by spiritualization. This is the kind of freedom that people take with the Word of God, particularly with regard to Bible prophecy as they try to spiritualize it away and say it doesn't mean what it says.

Let me tell you something, I want to tell you why spiritualizing is so popular, I want to tell you why people love it. The reason people love to spiritualize scripture is because spiritualizing makes you God. You see, when you start spiritualizing, then Scripture means anything you want it to mean. You become God instead of the God who wrote the Scriptures. Well let me tell you something, I believe God knows how to communicate. I believe He knows how to say things, I think He means what He says, I think He says what he means. I don't believe you have to have a PhD in hermeneutics or a PhD in imagination to understand the Word of God. You've got to have the Holy Spirit residing inside of you. That's why there are renowned seminary professors who have degrees piled on top of degrees who simply play loose with the Word of God because they've never been born again. They don't have the Holy Spirit inside of them. They can't interpret the Scripture because they don't have the Holy Spirit to help them interpret the Scriptures.

I want to give you some keys to understanding God's word. To understanding God's prophetic Word in particular. And here are the keys, number one, approach the scriptures with a child-like faith. And I mean this the Bible was given to us to read, to believe, and to apply to our lives. We are not supposed to approach the Bible as if it were Shakespeare for us to analyze and to criticize and dissect and to rip to pieces, which is what most seminary professors do as they play around with the Word of God.

The person that summed this up best for me was a dear friend who's gone to be with the Lord, Dr. Henry Morris, the founder of the Institute for Creation Research. Look what he said about Revelation, "The book of Revelation is not difficult to understand, it is difficult to believe. If you will believe it, you will understand it." It's so simple. You talk about the two witnesses, the book of Revelation says there're gonna be two witnesses of God who are gonna preach in Jerusalem for three and a half years before the Antichrist comes to kill them. Well if you believe that you'll understand the book of Revelation but if you look at most commentaries they say, "Well, no these are really not two witnesses. This is really just sort of a representative of evil in the world or good in the world." And they just spiritualize it into meaninglessness. And of course the next one spiritualizes a different way and the next one spiritualizes a different way, and nobody therefore can agree upon what the book of Revelation says because everybody spiritualizes it to say whatever they want it to say.

An example of this is Revelation chapter 7. In Revelation chapter 7 it says that at the beginning of the Tribulation a God is going to seal 144,000 Jews on their forehead and they will be protected throughout the Tribulation and become great missionaries for the Lord Jesus Christ all over the world. Well, the interesting thing about that is that if you look at commentaries you will find that most commentaries say, "No they really aren't Jews, this is the Church." They replace the Jewish people with the Church! If God had meant the Church surely He would have said the Church. He said Jews! He said 144,000. He named them by tribes. What would He have to do to convince us that He's talking about 144,000 Jews? Approach the scriptures with child-like faith.

Number two and that is to determine the meaning of symbols. People always say, "Well, you know, prophecy is full of so much symbolism." There are a lot of symbols in prophecy, but let me remind you of something, symbols stand for something literal. They don't just stand for anything you want them to stand for. They don't just stand for anything your imagination wants them to stand for. They stand for something literal. And you must be very careful in interpreting what symbols stand for, and you know what, the answer is usually very clear. Usually the Bible will tell you what the symbols stand for, point blank, just tell you. And if not, then you can take that word and look in a concordance, the word or the phrase, and you will find that in some other setting it's very clear and then it becomes clear in the setting where you're trying to figure out what it's all about.

How should symbols be interpreted? They should be interpreted carefully and they should be interpreted Biblically. Remember a symbol is something that stands for something literal. So actually you don't really have to guess most of the time, you just look in the Bible and it will tell you. The Bible is its own best interpreter. That's the rule I've found in regard to symbols. And I want to give you some examples. In the Old Testament, Ezekiel was taken and he was put into a valley of dry bones. I've been there, I've had that happen. You know the "frozen chosen" that you're speaking to sometimes. Well he was put in this valley of dry bones and he was told to preach to them and as he preached man those bones started rattling around, started coming together. And I want to see an instant video replay sometime of that to see how big his eyes got when all those bones started coming together. Now what was that all about? The Lord told me, I mean point blank. Right there in Ezekiel 27. The Lord said, "Let me tell you what this is

all about. People think the Jewish people are dead because they're in captivity, that's not true." He said, "I'm gonna bring them back, they're gonna become a people before me forever." He said, "One day I'm gonna bring them back to the land reestablish them in their land. And I'm gonna bless them like they've never been blessed before and through them all the nations of the world are gonna be blessed." God tells him the meaning of the symbolism. And yet, I would say to you without hesitation that 75% of all the sermons preached today from pulpits about Ezekiel 37 will say, "No that's not talking about the Jewish people at all, it's talking about the Church and about a great end time revival that's going to occur in the Church." No, it's talking about the Jewish people, it's not talking about the Church, but that's what happens when people start spiritualizing Scripture.

Here's another example. In Revelation chapter 1, Jesus appears to John on the Isle of Patmos, He appears as a High Priest and He has some stars in His right hand and He's got seven golden candlesticks that He's walking among. What does all that mean? You don't have to guess, it tells you point blank. It says, "The stars in His right hand are the angels of the seven churches." Which were probably the pastors and it says that the seven candlesticks represent seven actual churches that existed in that day and time. The passage itself explains the symbolism.

Or consider this. In revelation chapter 12 you come to one of the most controversial symbols in all of Bible prophecy. John sees a mysterious woman in the heavens, she has a crown of 12 stars and he describes this woman. And you know what 85% of commentators have said throughout history? That this woman is Mary! It's not Mary I mean the context makes it very clear it's not Mary. But you don't even have to look at that. Did you know all you have to do is just simply run a concordance on a woman with a crown of twelve stars? And when you run that concordance you will find that this exact same image, the exact image, was given to Joseph in Genesis 37:9 in which it was explained to him that this stood for the nation of Israel. If the symbol stood for the nation of Israel there, you can be assured that when God uses that symbol again, the symbol still stands for the nation of Israel and the context makes that perfectly clear. It is not Mary it is the nation of Israel. And in fact, later in that particular chapter, it becomes even more clear because at the end of chapter twelve it says that the Antichrist begins to persecute this woman and that she flees into the wilderness. This is not Mary this is the

nation of Israel, when he begins to persecute them during the Tribulation, and they flee into the wilderness to escape. But here we come again, with the problem of interpreting symbols. It says she will flee on the wings of a great eagle. I could not tell you how many books and just recently even, have been written in which people have tried to prove there's the United States in end time Bible prophecy. Where are we? What's the symbol of the United States? An eagle! What's gonna happen? She's gonna flee on the wings of a great eagle. Therefore the United States is gonna provide the end time airlift that's gonna fly all the Jews out of Jerusalem and into the wilderness where they will be protected by God. Well folks, there's not even an Air Force base in Jerusalem that will handle anything bigger than a piper cub. And we're going to go in with Boeing 747s and fly the Jewish people out? Where are we gonna fly them to? There's not landing place in Petra, there's no landing place in Jordan that's gonna take care of them. It's just ridiculous, and people write whole books about this when all you have to do is take the word eagle and look in a concordance or if you've got a concordance on your computer just type the word eagle in and you know what you'll do? You'll come up with multiple verses in which it says that when the children of Israel came out of Egypt they came out of Egypt on the wings of a great eagle. Does that mean they came out on an airplane? No, it means they came out of Egypt under the protection of almighty God. That's all in the world the symbolism means. And it's the exact same wording, exact same symbolism and it means that when they flee, they'll flee under the protection of almighty God. So I say to you, when you're considering symbols, consider the context, search the Scriptures for similar use of those symbols, and you'll be able to figure out what they are. The Bible is its own best interpreter.

Okay that brings me to another of these particular keys to understanding and that is always keep the context in mind. I cannot emphasize this enough. This is the greatest error that people make in the interpretation of the Bible. They do not keep in mind the context. Context determines the meanings of words. Not only in the Bible, but in all literature, the meaning of words is determined by context. Let me give you a secular example. What if I were to say to you, "I visited the White House last week." And then I said to you, "The White House announced today that the President is going to Russia." I have used the same term white house in two sentences. In the first sentences it's literal, in the second sentence it's symbolic. How do we know that? Context. The second sentence, the white house announced, the White house can't talk! We know that when

we say that we're just using a symbol that an announcement was made from the white house. One is literal, the other is symbolic. The same phrase, the same word, can be symbolic in one place and literal in another. It's all determined by context.

I want to give you a very interesting Biblical example of the crucifixion of context. Here is Revelation 20 versus Psalm 50:10. You might never have thought that they were in contradiction to each other. In Revelation chapter 20 it says six times, six times, that the Lord will come to this earth and reign for a thousand years. In Psalm 50:10, it says every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. Now what's the conflict? Again, you wouldn't believe how many books have been written that make this argument – now here's the argument they make: they say, "Okay, we can prove to you to beyond a shadow of a doubt that the thousand years in Revelation 20 does not mean a thousand years. That is just symbolic. And the way we prove it is go to Psalm 50:10 where it says God has cattle on a thousand hills. Are there only a thousand hills in the world? No! So a thousand hills in Psalm 50:10 must be symbolic. Therefore, every time the word thousand is used, it's always symbolic." What? Come on! It may be symbolic in one passage, and very literal in another passage. The fact that it's symbolic in Psalm 50:10 does not mean it is symbolic in Revelation 20. I don't know what God would have to do in Revelation 20 to convince us that Jesus is coming back to reign for a thousand years. He says so six times. And the context makes it very clear that He's speaking literally.

There's a fourth key to understanding, reconcile all relevant passages. Reconcile all relevant passages. Folks, you can prove anything with one passage, anything. What you must do when you are working with doctrine, to get the true meaning of any passage...you've got to look up all the relevant verses. They must be searched out, explored and compared. Let me give you an example, 2 Peter 3:10 "The Day of the Lord will come like a thief in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat and the earth and its works will be burned up." You wouldn't believe how many people have sent me that passage and said, "Dave Reagan you don't have the slightest idea what's gonna happen in the end times. When you start talking about a Millennial reign of Jesus Christ because this passage says, 'The Lord is coming back and on the day He comes back the earth will be burned up and there is no mention whatsoever of a Millennial reign.'" Well folks, if this was the only verse in the Bible about the end times, I would agree. When Jesus comes back the earth will be

burned up and that's it. But this is not the only passage. You have to look at all the passages, and when you look at all the passages it becomes overwhelming clear. Both Old Testament and New Testament, that the Lord Jesus Christ is going to come back and reign over this earth for a thousand years and at the end of that reign, the earth will be consumed with fire.

No prophet is ever given the full picture, and that brings me to the fifth point, you must keep in mind the prophetic perspective. No prophet gives you the whole picture. No prophet says, "Here's what's gonna happen in the end times, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10." They give you pictures of what's going to happen. You've got to look at all the prophets to put it all together. The prophetic viewpoint is illustrated in this diagram here. It's like a person looking down a mountain range. What he sees are the mountain tops. But he does not see the valleys in between those mountain tops. He sees three events, the Crucifixion, the Second Coming, and the New Jerusalem. But he doesn't see the valleys in between those. We get the valley perspective from the New Testament. From the New Testament we can see that there was a period of time between the First Coming and the Second Coming. In fact this is what we call a compressed viewpoint. As a result of this many rabbis came to the conclusion that there were gonna be two Messiahs. There would be the Messiah Ben Joseph who would come and suffer. And there would be the Messiah Ben David who would come and reign. Because they did not understand it was going to be the same person in two comings with a period of time between the two. So you have to keep in mind the prophetic perspective that they see mountain tops, they do not see all the events, and they do not see the valleys of time between them. And as a result of that, as I say, many of them came to the conclusion that there was going to be two comings of a messiah, there would be the suffering one and the triumphant one, and did not realize it would be the same person coming twice.

The final point I would make is that some prophecies are pre-filled in type. And this is a very important point, I wish I had time to develop it further, but it's one of the peculiar characteristics of Bible prophecy that's often pre-filled before it is ultimately fulfilled. A good example is the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Many people argue that was the fulfillment of Matthew 24 but it was not the fulfillment of Matthew 24 it was a pre-fulfillment in type. The ultimate fulfillment is yet to come. There was no abomination of desolation erected in the temple in 70 AD and that has to be done for that prophecy to be fulfilled. It

was not the greatest Tribulation in Jewish history in verse 21 it says it will be greatest. There was one greater than that. At most a million Jews were killed then, 6 million were killed in the holocaust, two thirds are gonna die in the great holocaust at the end of the Tribulation. Number three, it was not so terrible it could have resulted in the death of all living beings. And yet we're told that this will be a time that will be so terrible that if it's not cut short, every living being will die, and that is certainly going to be the case in the great Tribulation.

Well let's review. Approach the Scriptures with childlike faith. Interpret symbols for their plain sense meaning. Keep in mind the context. Reconcile all relevant passages. Remember the prophetic perspective. Remember that some prophecies are pre-filled in type. Oh yes, and let me add a seventh because all good prophecy teachers have seven points, since that's the symbol of completion and perfection, and the seventh one is, rely on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. When you get ready to study the Scriptures pray that they Holy Spirit will fill you with illumination. Pray that the Holy Spirit will guide you. Pray that the Holy Spirit will show you the true meaning of these passages. Rely on the Holy Spirit. Let me leave you with a challenge. And the challenge is this, interpret God's Word all of it, all of it, for its plain sense meaning. Don't play with it, don't try to play games. Just interpret it for its plain sense meaning, and when you do, you will begin to understand it.

Well folks, that's our program for this week and I hope it was a blessing to you. I hope too that you will be back with us next week when we will continue this series on the fundamentals of Bible prophecy by taking a look at end time viewpoints. We will look in detail at the four major end time views of Bible prophecy. I will explain each one of them and then I will compare and contrast them. Most important, I will take a look at the Biblical basis of each one in order to determine which is the most faithful to what the Bible teaches. Until next week, this is Dave Reagan speaking for Lamb and Lion Ministries saying, "Look up, be watchful, for our redemption is drawing near!"

End of Program