

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 28

The end—only the beginning

If there is no future, Paul writes, then it would be foolish to have faith in Christ (1 Corinthians 15:19). Prophecy is an essential and very encouraging part of the Christian faith. Bible prophecy announces tremendously good news for us. We will find it most encouraging if we focus on the core message, not debatable details.

The purpose of prophecy

Prophecy is not an end in itself—it declares a more important truth. God is reconciling humanity to himself, forgiving our sins and restoring us to friendship with him. Prophecy proclaims this reality.

Prophecy exists not just to predict events, but to point us toward God. It tells us who God is, what he is like, what he is doing, and what he wants us to do. Prophecy urges people to receive reconciliation to God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Many specific prophecies were fulfilled in Old Testament times, and we still await the fulfillment of others. But the sharp focus of all prophecy is redemption—the forgiveness of sins and eternal life that comes through Jesus Christ. Prophecy assures us that God is in control of history (Daniel 4:17); it strengthens our faith in Christ (John 14:29) and gives us hope for the future (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

Moses and the prophets wrote about Christ, including the fact that he would be killed and resurrected (Luke 24:27, 46). They also foretold events after Jesus' resurrection, such as the preaching of the gospel (verse 47).

Prophecy points us to salvation in Jesus Christ. If we don't get salvation, prophecy will do us no

good. It is only through Christ that we can be part of the kingdom that will last forever (Daniel 7:13-14, 27).

The Bible proclaims the return of Christ, the last judgment and eternal punishment and rewards. With these predictions, prophecy warns humanity of the *need* for salvation as well as announces the guarantee of that salvation. Prophecy tells us that God calls us to account (Jude 14-15), that he wants us saved (2 Peter 3:9) and that he has in fact saved us (1 John 2:1-2). It assures us that all evil will be defeated and that all injustice and suffering will end (1 Corinthians 15:25; Revelation 21:4).

Prophecy encourages believers that our labors are not in vain. We will be rescued from persecutions, vindicated and rewarded. Prophecy reminds us of God's love and faithfulness, and helps us be faithful to him (2 Peter 3:10-15; 1 John 3:2-3). By reminding us that all physical treasures are temporary, prophecy encourages us to treasure the as-yet-unseen things of God and our eternal relationship with him.

Zechariah points to prophecy as a call to repentance (Zechariah 1:3-4). God warns of punishment, but looks for repentance. As shown in the story of Jonah, God is willing to reverse his predictions, if only the people will turn to him. The goal of prophecy is to turn us to God, who has a wonderful future for us; the goal is not to satisfy our itch to know "secret" things.

A need for caution

How can we understand Bible prophecy? Only with great caution. Well-meaning prophecy buffs have brought disrepute on the gospel with

erroneous predictions and misguided dogmatism. Because of such misuse of prophecy, some people ridicule the Bible and scoff at Christ himself. The list of failed predictions should be a sober warning that personal conviction is no guarantee of truth. Since failed predictions can weaken faith, we must be cautious.

We should not need exciting predictions to make us serious about spiritual growth and Christian living. A knowledge of dates and other details (even if they turn out to be correct) is no guarantee of salvation. Our focus should be on Christ, not on assessing the credentials of potential Beast powers.

An obsession on prophecy means that we are not giving enough emphasis to the gospel. People need to repent and trust Christ whether or not his return is near, whether or not there will be a millennium, whether or not America is identified in Bible prophecy.

Why is prophecy so difficult to interpret? Perhaps the biggest reason is that it is often given in figurative language. The original readers may have known what the symbols meant, but since we live in a different culture and time, we cannot always be sure.

Psalms 18 is an example of figurative language. Its poetry describes the way that God delivered David from his enemies (verse 1). David uses several images for this: escape from a grave (verses 4-6), earthquake (verse 7), heavenly signs (verses 8-14), even a rescue at sea (verses 15-18). These things did not literally happen, but biblical poetry uses such imaginative figures of speech. This is true of prophecy, too.

Isaiah 40:3-4 tells us that mountains will be brought low and a road made straight—but this is not intended to be taken literally. Luke 3:4-6 indicates that this prophecy was fulfilled by John the Baptist. The prophecy was not about mountains and roads at all.

Joel 2:28-29 predicted that God's Spirit would be poured out on "all flesh," but Peter said it was fulfilled with several dozen on Pentecost (Acts 2:16-17). The dreams and visions that Joel predicted may not have been literal, but Peter did not press the prophesied details that far—and neither should we. When we are dealing with

figurative language, the fulfillment is not intended to match the prophecy literally.

These factors affect the way people interpret biblical prophecy. One reader may prefer a literal meaning, another may prefer a figurative meaning, and it may be impossible to prove which is correct. This forces us to focus on the big picture, not the details. We are looking through frosted glass, not a magnifying glass.

In several major areas of prophecy, there is no Christian consensus. Ideas about the rapture, the tribulation, the millennium, the intermediate state and hell are widely debated. (See our website for articles on some of these subjects.) These details are not essential.

Although they are part of God's plan, and important to him, it is not essential that we get all the right answers—especially if we think less of people who have different answers. Our attitude is more important than having all the right answers.

Perhaps we can compare prophecy to a journey. We do not need to know exactly where our destination is, what path we will take, or how fast we will go. What we need most of all is to trust in our trailblazer, Jesus Christ. He is the only one who knows the way, and we won't make it without him. Just stick with him—he will take care of the details.

With these cautions in mind, let's look at some basic Christian beliefs about the future.

The return of Christ

The benchmark event for our beliefs about the future is the second coming of Christ. There is tremendous consensus on the fact that Jesus will return.

Jesus told his disciples he would "come again" (John 14:3). He also warned his disciples not to waste their time trying to figure out when that will be (Matthew 24:36). He criticized people who thought that time was short (Matthew 25:1-13) and those who thought there would be a long delay (Matthew 24:45-51). No matter what, our responsibility is the same: to be ready.

Angels told the disciples that just as surely as Jesus had gone into heaven he would also return (Acts 1:11). He will be "revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels" (2

Thessalonians 1:7). Paul called it “the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13). Peter said that Jesus would be “revealed” (1 Peter 1:7, 13). John also said he would appear (1 John 2:28), and Hebrews 9:28 says that “he will appear a second time...to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.”

There will be “a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God” (1 Thessalonians 4:16). There will be no mistake about it.

Two other events will occur when Christ returns: the resurrection and the judgment. Paul writes that the dead in Christ will rise when the Lord comes, and believers still alive then will also rise to meet the Lord as he comes to earth (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). “At the last trumpet,” Paul writes, “the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed” (1 Corinthians 15:52). We will be transformed—made glorious, powerful, imperishable, immortal and spiritual (verses 42-44).

Matthew 24:31 seems to describe this event from another perspective: Christ “will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.” In the parable of the weeds, Jesus said that he will send out his angels at the end of the age, “and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil” (Matthew 13:40-41).

“The Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done” (Matthew 16:27). Judgment is also part of the master’s return in the parable of the faithful servant (Matthew 24:45-51) and the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30).

Paul says that when the Lord comes, “he will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God” (1 Corinthians 4:5). Of course, God already knows each person, and in that sense, judgment occurs long before Christ’s return. But it will be then that judgment is made public for everyone.

The fact that we will live again, and that we will be rewarded, is tremendous encouragement. After

discussing the resurrection, Paul exclaims: “Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:57-58).

The last days

To arouse interest, some prophecy teachers ask, “Are we living in the last days?” The correct answer is “yes”—and it has been correct for 2,000 years. Peter quoted a prophecy about the last days and said it applied to his own day (Acts 2:16-17). So did the author of Hebrews (Hebrews 1:2). The last days are a lot longer than some people think. Jesus triumphed over the enemy and began a new age.

Wars and troubles have plagued humanity for thousands of years. Will it get worse? Probably. Then it might get better, and then worse again. Or it will get better for some people while growing worse for others. The misery index goes up and down throughout history, and this will probably continue.

But through the ages, it seems that some Christians want it to get worse. They almost hope for a Great Tribulation, described as the worst time of trouble the world will ever see (Matthew 24:21). They have a fascination with the Antichrist, the Beast, the man of sin, and other enemies of God. They often believe that any given terrible event indicates that Christ will soon return.

It is true that Jesus predicted a time of terrible tribulation (Matthew 24:21), but most of what he predicted in Matthew 24 was fulfilled in the siege of Jerusalem, A.D. 70. Jesus was warning his disciples about events that they would live to see, and that people in Judea would need to flee to the mountains (verse 16).

Jesus predicted constant tribulation until his return. “In this world you will have trouble,” Jesus said (John 16:33). Many of his disciples gave their lives for their belief in Jesus. Trials are part of the Christian life; God does not protect us from all our problems (Acts 14:22; 2 Tim. 3:12; 1 Peter 4:12). Even in the apostolic age, antichrists were at work (1 John 2:18, 22; 2 John 7).

Is a Great Tribulation predicted for the future? Many Christians believe so, and perhaps they are right. But millions of Christians throughout the world face persecution today. Many are killed. For each of them, the tribulation cannot get any worse than it already is. Terrible times have afflicted Christians for two millennia. Perhaps the Great Tribulation is a lot longer than many people think.

Our Christian responsibilities are the same whether the Tribulation is near or far—or whether it has already begun. Speculation about the future does not help us become more like Christ, and when it is used to pressure people into repentance, it is sadly misused. Speculation about the Tribulation is not a good use of our time.

The millennium

Revelation 20 speaks of a 1,000-year reign of Christ and the saints. Some Christians interpret this literally as a 1,000-year kingdom that Christ will set up when he returns. Other Christians view the 1,000-year period figuratively, symbolizing the rule of Christ in the church before his return.

For example, the number 1,000 may be used figuratively (Deuteronomy 7:9; Psalm 50:10), and there is no way to prove that it must be taken literally in Revelation. Revelation is written in a highly figurative style. No other scriptures speak of a temporary kingdom to be set up when Christ returns. Indeed, verses such as Daniel 2:44 suggest that the kingdom will be eternal, without any crisis 1,000 years later.

If there is a millennial kingdom after Christ returns, then the wicked will be resurrected and judged 1,000 years after the righteous are (Revelation 20:5). But Jesus' parables do not suggest any such interval (Matthew 25:31-46; John 5:28-29). The millennium was not part of Jesus' gospel. Paul wrote that the righteous and the wicked will be resurrected on the same day (2 Thessalonians 1:6-10).

Many more details could be discussed on this topic, but it is not necessary here. Scriptures can be gathered in support of each view. But no matter what a person thinks about the millennium, this much is clear: The time period described in Revelation 20 will eventually end, and will be followed by an eternal and glorious new heavens and new earth, which are

For further reading

Max Anders, *What You Need to Know About Bible Prophecy* (Nelson, 1997).
Gleason Archer, ed. *Three Views on the Rapture* (Zondervan, 1996).
Gilbert Bilezekian, *Christianity 101* (Zondervan, 1993), chapter 8.
Darrell Bock, ed. *Three Views on the Millennium* (Zondervan, 1999).
Millard Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine* (Baker, 1992), part 12.
E.W. Fudge and R.A. Peterson, *Two Views on Hell* (InterVarsity, 2000).

greater, better and longer than the millennium. So, when we think about the wonderful world tomorrow, we might want to focus on the eternal, perfect kingdom, not a temporary phase. We have an eternity to look forward to!

An eternity of joy

What will eternity be like? We know only in part (1 Corinthians 13:9; 1 John 3:2), because all our words and ideas are based on the world today. Jesus described our eternal reward in several ways: It will be like finding a treasure, or inheriting many possessions, or ruling a kingdom, or attending a wedding banquet. It is like all these things, but so much better that it could also be said that it is nothing like them. Our eternity with God will be better than our words can describe.

David put it this way: "You will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand" (Psalm 16:11). The best part of eternity will be living with God, being like him, seeing him as he really is, knowing him more fully (1 John 3:2). This is the purpose for which God made us, and this will satisfy us and give us joy forevermore.

And in 10,000 years, with zillions yet to come, we will look back on our lives today, smiling at the troubles we had, marveling at how quickly God did his work when we were mortal. It was only the beginning, and there will be no end.

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