

Chapter 7
A Western View of Prophecy

*“And now I have told you before it come to pass,
that, when it is come to pass, ye might believe.”*

John 14:29

The following thoughts on biblical prophecy probably come more from disillusionment than anything else. This was the driving force which called me to see if Scripture really said what prophecy buffs tell us. Let me say at the outset that my intention is not to attack or ridicule. However, I might state that what I propose in this chapter will go against the mainstream of almost all prophetic interpretation. By going against the mainstream, I do not mean that I have a new prophetic scheme that will render the traditional views invalid. What I do mean is that I think we are completely off track in the way we handle prophetic interpretation. I have given this a great deal of thought over many years. Perhaps my thinking comes from a prejudiced mind, shaped by scholars whose prophetic interpretations have been left thread bare with the passing of time. In simple terms, what they led me to believe would come to pass, never came to pass. The prophetic views are very western and come from too much downtime.

The title of this chapter is “*A Western View of Prophecy.*” Prophetic interpretation is more than just a discipline. It’s arriving at an interpretation of future events based on a

limited amount of information. More about this later. The Scriptures are prophetic to a large degree. The question however does not revolve around the issue of prophecy but how to interpret the prophetic Scriptures.

A Radical View

What I am about to say will come as a shock to many. My only request and prayer is that you read this with an open mind and then make your own decision.

“Prophecy can only be understood by those living during the time of its fulfillment and the details were never intended for those living prior to it.”

Obviously a statement as bold as this needs some explanation. Clearly there are some general truths in the prophetic scheme of things that we can understand, i.e. Jesus is coming again. But I strongly contend that the divisive spirit that has arisen over the pre-millennial, post-millennial, pre-tribulation, post-tribulation, and mid-tribulation is a stench in the nostrils of God. This has brought disgrace to His holy name, has made the church a laughing stock by outsiders and has left hundreds of Biblical scholars with egg on their faces. If I take the time to quote from the prophetic commentaries of the last two decades that have led the church to believe the world could not possibly go on another five years because of the lack of oil in the Middle East, or because the planets in 1983 are lining up in such a way that the combined gravitational force would split the Mt. of Olives, or that Russia will come down from the north because Ezekiel 38 explicitly says it will happen, or that the common market fits Daniel's ten kings, I would need more than a paper, I would need a book. We have shot ourselves in the foot a

thousand times over these issues which is one reason the church is limping along. Believe it or not the Scriptures themselves have a great deal to say about how difficult it is to sort through prophecy. Let's examine a few texts dealing with this issue. *"And I heard, but I understood not: Then said I, 'O my Lord, what shall be the end of these things?' And He said, 'Go thy way, Daniel, for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end.'" (Daniel 12:8-9)*

Note carefully that Daniel who recorded prophecy under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit didn't understand what he had prophesied. This is in perfect harmony with a New Testament passage in I Peter 1:9-12,

"Receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls. Of which salvation the prophets have inquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you: searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow. Unto whom it was revealed that not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister the things, which are now reported unto you by them that have preached the gospel unto you with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven; which things the angels desire to look into."

Here we have the Lord telling us that Old Testament prophets inquired about the details. "What and what manner of time these things would be." Verse 12 tells us that it was not for them to know "but unto us they did minister."

In Acts 8:30-31 Philip asks the Ethiopian eunuch if he can understand the prophetic statements of Isaiah: “do you understand what you re reading?” The eunuch responded, “How can I except some man guide me?” If it was so clear why couldn’t he understand? But now that the prophecy of the Messiah had come to pass Philip could render a perfect interpretation.

Listen to these words in John 12:16: *“These things understood not his disciples at the first: but when Jesus was glorified, then remembered they that these things were written of him, and that they had done these things unto him.”*

Here again we have the word “understand.” Again we read in Luke 9:22 these words: *“Saying, The Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be slain, and be raised the third day.”*

Yet in Luke 18:31 and 34 we read this: *“Then he took unto him the twelve, and said unto them, Behold we go up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of man shall be accomplished. For he shall be delivered unto the Gentiles, and shall be mocked, and spitefully entreated, and spitted on: and they shall scourge him, and put him to death: and the third day he shall rise again. And they understood none of these things: and this saying was hid from them, neither knew they the things which were spoken.”*

Daniel didn't understand, the eunuch didn't understand, the disciples didn't understand, the prophets of old didn't understand UNTIL the prophecy had come to pass then it all made sense, but only to those living during its fulfillment.

Let's see if we can piece some thoughts together. Consider the credentials of the prophets. They were holy men (II Peter 2). They were moved by the Spirit of God (II Peter 2). They actually penned prophecies, not commentaries, yet the divine record states they did not understand the future of which they prophesied. They clearly had a prophetic overview but not all the details. Consider also that they were looking down the corridor of time through the prophetic lens of Scripture, as are we, but what seemed blurry to the inspired writer is crystal clear to us, the uninspired interpreter. We see into the future with perfect vision. How is it that we can sit in the shadow of these giants and declare in the minutest detail all future events, while they searched diligently only to find they looked through a glass dimly. The tables have turned. The amateurs are telling the pros what it's all about. If God intends us to know all the details of future events don't you think He would have included charts, diagrams and inspired PowerPoint slides in the cannon?

Some may wish to counter my argument with, "Yes, but much more time has elapsed since the days of Ezekiel." As true as that may be, as we have already seen, the disciples didn't even understand the cross which was right in front of their nose. Yet Jesus did not rebuke them in Luke 18:31-34. However, once it came to pass they were rebuked for not recognizing the event. *"Then he said unto them, O fools, and slow of*

heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke: 24:25-27).

Time is not necessarily the issue. The events that come to pass will be unmistakably clear if we are well versed in His word. Listen to the words of our Lord. *“And now I have told you before it came to pass, that, when it comes to pass, ye might believe” (John 14:29).*

Don't overlook the importance of the word *WHEN*. It designates the fulfillment as being the time period for full understanding. Remember Peter's comments on the day of Pentecost. *“But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel” (Acts 2:16).* He goes on to describe Joel's inspired prophecy of how the spirit of the Lord would be poured out and how there would be signs and wonders in the heavens, and how the sun would be darkened and the moon would turn to blood. Question? Was the Spirit of the Lord poured out? Yes! Did the sun turn dark and the moon turn to blood? No! Was Joel wrong? Of course not. God simply hadn't told Joel there would be at least two thousand years of church history that would separate the two events, and I'm not sure this is necessarily the proper interpretation. It's a good thing our twentieth century interpreters weren't on hand. They would have broken out the timeline charts and had a field day, only to be proven wrong again. It is common knowledge that the people of the Old Testament were more than mildly confused regarding the coming Messiah. His first

coming was prophesied as a lowly, suffering, servant (Isaiah 53). His second coming shows Him as a triumphant Lion and King (Joel 3). Some thought there were two Messiahs. Could anyone blame them? They were not aware of the time lapse between the two advents. Scripture is replete with prophetic misunderstanding UNTIL the events came to pass.

Words, Words And More Words

*“All prophetic schemes are hopelessly flawed
and rely heavily upon the subtle nuances of words in their original language.”*

Another factor which makes prophecy so very difficult is the exact meaning of words. Words are obviously crucial to all biblical doctrine. However, unlike eschatology (the doctrine of last things) other doctrines do not hinge as much upon words as they do upon concepts and historical settings. Salvation for example could be perfectly understood without any knowledge of the terms propitiation, justification, sanctification, etc. Salvation is seen in historical events such as the Red Sea, Abraham offering Isaac, Jonah, the parable of the publican and the Pharisee in Luke 18, etc. All of this flows neatly into the New Testament where it is refined and distilled in the epistles for ultimate clarification. Illustrations and typology abound making it quite clear what one must do to be saved. However, in stark contrast, prophetic schemes (pre-mil, post-mil, a-mil, pre-trib) rely solely on the meaning of a single word. In his book, The Pre-wrath Rapture of

the Church, Marv Rosenthal explains how the Greek word *ek* affects the entire scenario of the various prophetic schemes. As it relates to Revelation 3:10

He does an equally capable job showing how the term “coming” which can be translated by three different Greek words, compliments or destroys an entire prophetic scenario. Unlike other doctrines which show up in typology, history, allegory, parable, and progressive revelation, prophecy is still future with nothing to hang our arguments on but fine nuances in the meaning of words once removed from our own language. This is shaky ground at best from which to construct an argument as complex as detailed future events.

Forcing The Issue

*All prophetic schemes force, twist, distort and manipulate Scripture
to make the pieces fit the espoused prophetic view.”*

As I mentioned above Marvin Rosenthal’s *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* which came out a number of years ago caused a real stir. I highly recommend this book, but not for reasons that one might expect. Mr. Rosenthal shows unequivocally how terribly faulty the various traditional prophetic views are, and he is right. He then espouses his own view which I might add is very interesting, but still, in my opinion, violates the spirit of how prophecy is to be interpreted. What is so refreshing about the book is a) the author has done his homework; b) he is not sensational in his approach;

c) he is delightfully honest; d) he is extremely humble; e) he does the best job of avoiding “forced interpretations.” With all of these fine qualities the book still lays out a neat timeline of future events which in my opinion simply cannot be known at this hour of history. It is worth reading because it shows how forced prophetic scenarios are, and how the Scriptures must be manipulated to arrive at an already biased conclusion. All books on prophecy set out to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that their view is right. The writer never fails to remind us how neatly his argument fits Scripture. There are rarely any loose ends, or difficult passages to deal with because they can all be explained by the prophetic theme heralded by the author. What is so unique is that every author is able to show that his prophetic view is in perfect accord with divine revelation. I have never seen so many square pegs fit so neatly into round holes.

Clanging Of The Symbols

*“Every prophetic view must assign meaning
to highly questionable symbols in order to promote the espoused view.”*

I will never forget, as a young, naive believer thirty-five years ago, attending an evening class on prophecy, how utterly amazed I was that the statue in Nebechednezzar’s dream literally represented the future reigning kingdoms. “Wow!”, I thought, “here it is all spelled out - Babylon, Media Persia, Greece, Rome, and Russia.” What I didn’t realize was that the Scriptures didn’t spell it out, but my prof did. He just helped fill in a few of the missing blanks. After all, it is intuitively obvious to the

most casual observer that the following passage so clearly represents Russia. Anyone who can't see that from the text must be blind. *"And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever"* (Daniel 2:44).

Another classic text to keep us entertained is found in Matthew 24:32-34.

The traditional pre-millennial view is to arbitrarily assign the meaning of the fig tree to be Israel. Why not? It makes their 1948 return to the land a lot more meaningful, because if this text teaches that Israel will return and the generation living at that time will not pass away, then all we have to do is assign a time frame to the word generation and presto bingo we know when to expect the rapture unless you don't believe in the rapture. Well here we are almost sixty years later which is outside normal time limits given to the word generation. And so on it goes with computer capabilities to assign everyone the mark of the beast to the ten kings in Daniel representing the common market which doesn't exist anymore, to Rosh the chief prince of Meschech and Tubal in Ezekiel being Russia, which has also collapsed.

Bear in mind that I am not saying all prophetic schemes are wrong. One of them might be right. The fig tree might represent Israel and maybe Ezek. 38 is a description of Russia (which doesn't exist anymore), but I wouldn't stake my life on it nor would I endorse an entire prophetic system which is based on such faulty assumptions, nor

would I make it an issue of fellowship or church membership. Christians have been defrauded long enough over such issues. Disappointment and disillusionment reign when events don't fall neatly into place as one had been promised they would.

What Did The Prophets See?

Try to imagine no New Testament revelation regarding the Lord Jesus Christ. Put aside all your knowledge of His birth, death and resurrection (events which were prophesied and have come to pass). Now put yourself in the shoes of an Old Testament prophet, priest or king. What could he have assumed about this future Messiah through the prophetic lens of Scripture?

Gen. 3:15 - seed
 Deut. 18:15 - prophet
 Job 19:25 - redeemer
 Psa. 16:10 - will not be left in hell
 Psa. 22:1 - forsaken
 Psa. 24:9 - king
 Isa. ;7:14 - virgin born
 Isa. 9:6 - son born, mighty God
 Isa. 53 - suffer and die
 Daniel - cut off
 Zech. 12:10 - pierced

Admittedly this is not an exhaustive listing of Messianic prophecies, but these are certainly the major ones. What could an Old Testament believer have surmised about this Messiah? First off, I'm not convinced that he would have seen all of these texts as relating to this future deliverer. The messianic Psalms seem to be speaking about David. Peter in Acts 2:29 sheds light on what they must have previously believed when he said, *"Men and brethren, let me freely speak unto you of the patriarch David, that he*

is both dead and buried, and his sepulchre is with us unto this day.” Peter’s point is that a reading of this prophecy in the Old Testament was not clear. But now that it has been fulfilled it is very clear who David was referring to.

Paul indicates the same thing in Acts 13:35-36.

The clear indication here is that many must have thought Psalm 16:10 was referring to David. Was it evidently clear that the prophet in Deut. 18 of which Moses spoke and the Messiah of which Daniel spoke were in fact one and the same? Here again let Scripture give testimony: *“Many of the people therefore when they heard this saying, said, ‘Of a truth this is the prophet’. Others said, ‘This is the Christ (Messiah)’”* (John 7:40, 41).

Can you imagine the number of possible prophetic interpretations that could have arisen out of these verses? There may have been an AMESSIAH view, (the prefix “A-” meaning no.) This could have come out of a wrong interpretation of Zech. 12:10 where Jehovah is pierced. Since Jehovah is God, and God is a spirit and spirits can’t be pierced then this must not be literal terminology. But when God took on human flesh and was pierced at the cross then the prophetic Scriptures made sense. *“For these things were done, that the Scripture should be fulfilled, a bone of him shall not be broken. And again another Scripture saith, they shall look on Him whom they pierced”* (John 19:36, 37).

The number of potential combinations of prophetic views could have been innumerable. The questions of how, when and why must have been most perplexing. But that wasn't the issue. The issue was simply to know that a deliverer would some day come for His people, and when He does THEN the prophetic word will come to full light and will bless those living during the time of fulfillment. Those living prior to the fulfillment were to be obedient to what they knew and not try and second guess the Scriptures.

Once future events take their place in history, those living will be able to say (if prepared and knowledgeable in the word) "so that's who the witnesses are in Revelation 11. Now it all makes sense these seals, trumpets, elders, spirits, dragons, etc. This is not what I had anticipated at all."

But our present day western pride and insatiable appetite for future details will not allow us to learn from the experience of those before us who simply didn't understand. We will not be content until we have forced, manipulated, distorted, jammed, mashed, and shoved every symbol and verb tense into our prophetic scheme. And if others don't agree then we will split from those heretics and treat them as heathens and publicans. Marvin Rosenthal was dismissed from the board of Israel My Glory because he shifted his view from pre-tribulational rapture to pre-wrath rapture. I could understand dismissal for drug abuse, immorality, drunkenness, or blasphemy. But to be fired because your view of prophecy doesn't match a doctrinal statement is morally unjustifiable. Shame on us! Good men are dismissed because they "erred not

knowing the statement of faith.” I hate to upset anyone but Daniel was not pre-trib for the Bible says he didn’t understand. Moses was not pre-mil for the Bible says he didn’t understand. Isaiah was not a-mil for the Bible says he didn’t understand. It seems that only twenty first century Christians understand. We understood that the social security number was the mark of the beast. We understood that the six-day war was a sign of the end. We understood that the Jupiter effect would split the Mt. of Olives. We understood that the Middle East oil would cause war with Russia. Yet here we are knee deep in understanding and buried in unfulfillment. In essence many have been taken – taken for a ride on the prophetic railroad that has led to mass confusion, church splits, hurt feelings and multitudes left in the wake of prophetic interpretation which all the while we never understood. Underground churches in China are not concerned with such matters.

A Call To Holiness

*“All prophetic views are promoted by those
who espouse them as essential for holy living.”*

What could be more important than a close walk with the Lord? Holy living is what the Christian life is all about. When asked, “What difference does it make how I feel about the future?” the standard reply is, “It will affect how you conduct your daily life”. Again I pause to say how much I appreciate this as a motivation but in all honesty I have never faced a new day saying, “I had better obey the Lord today because I’m amill

or pre-mil and He may come back at any moment.” I am motivated by the following: “I love Him because He first loved me” (I John 4:19). If I love Him I will keep His commandments (John 15:10). For the love of Christ constrains me (II Corinthians. 5:14).

“But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the words that are therein shall be burned up. Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness. Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat?” (II Pet. 3:10-12)

The above verses could be held up as a good argument to support the fact that prophecy will drive one to a holy life. Note carefully that I have never said we can't know anything about the future. I simply contend that we can't know all the details especially the timing. This passage does not deal with details but causes us to focus on the truth that everything one day will burn up. Therefore why put stock in a temporal value system? Clearly I am motivated to have a holy life because I fear God and know that all will eventually come to an end. But to say that, if I am not a-mil, pre-trib, post-trib, mid-trib or some other prophetic flavor, my life will not reflect God's holiness, again

becomes another tactic to force prophetic interpretation. Joseph lived a godly life without the aid of millennial timeline charts put on PowerPoint.

And of course all those who endorse a particular prophetic theme claim the early church held to their view. Here again we can't even agree on what happened in the past much less interpret what will happen in the future. This chapter was not written to ridicule or mock prophetic schemes, but to bring to our attention that these issues must be left to the Lord in His sovereign plan to carry out. It can be exciting to study the Scripture and arrive at personal views but never to the point of dividing over. You be the judge.

Only in the west do we labor over such trivia. Just tell someone who is being persecuted for their faith that you have good news for them – we don't go through the tribulation. Bring in your favorite timeline chart to some believer in an underground church in Iraq and tell them you have the date of Christ's return which happens to be tomorrow at 6:00 a.m. Again I think we have too much time on our hands as a westerner. Jesus guides us with precision through the future with no prophetic stone left unturned.

When I hear of missionaries who can't get support from churches because they can't sign the church's doctrinal statement on end times, I grieve. When godly people are denied church membership over eschatological issues, I'm deeply hurt. The energy, time, and money wasted on this cannot be calculated. We need to follow the transcendent Christ who is coming again in all His glory and forsake the westerner's Jesus.

who is more confused than ever. I do not say that it is wrong to have a prophetic view. Just don't put it on the same shelf as the gospel. Put it on the shelf with who wrote the book of Hebrews.