

HERMENEUTICS	Page 1
HERM008	a Grace Notes course

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## Hermeneutics

Source Materials:

**“Hermeneutics: the Science and Art of Biblical Interpretation”**

Drue Freeman, Pastor, Trinity Bible Church, Oklahoma City, OK

**“A Syllabus of Studies in Hermeneutics”**, Rollin Thomas Chafer

### HERM008

adapted for Grace Notes training by Warren Doud

Grace Notes

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# Hermeneutics

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Lesson	
HERM 001	Lessons 1 and 2
HERM 002	Lessons 3 and 4
HERM 003	Lesson 5
HERM 004	Lesson 6
HERM 005	Lessons 7 and 8
HERM 006	Lesson 9 and 10
HERM 007	Lesson 11
<b>HERM 008</b>	<b>Lesson 12</b>
HERM 009	Lesson 13
HERM 010	Lesson 14

## Lesson 12 - The Interpretation Of Prophecy

Prophecy predicts by the Word while Typology predicts by the institution, act or person. Prophecy foretells an event while typology prefigures it.

The interpretation of prophecy is one of the most difficult areas of Scripture. Prophecy is often clothed in highly symbolic and typological vocabulary. There are principles to follow, but no formulas. Interpreting prophecy is like putting together a puzzle. Each piece is important and the lack of some pieces can give a distorted picture. The vocabulary is not easy. The historical setting is often difficult to find. Sometimes, key words in Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek are used only once in all of Scripture and their meanings are open to question. An incorrectly interpreted type or symbol, or one distorted for the personal fame of the student can distort the entire picture. We in effect must look for the chronological control verses and

then seek to fill in the blanks. The bulk of information is overwhelming. Just add up the number of chapters in the prophetic books and compare that to the 1,189 chapters in Scripture. Even if we do not include other prophetic references, we can easily see that almost 25% of the Scriptures are prophetic in nature. It is also amazing to realize that often we must look at prophecy that has been fulfilled in order to see how the original prophecy was intended. The study of prophecy is not easy, but it is rewarding (Rev 1:3).

The principles of the interpretation of Biblical prophecy must recognize the literal fulfillment of the Word of God, paying careful attention to the grammar and the historical setting. All other prophecies in the Bible, especially those concerning the cross of Jesus Christ had a literal fulfillment, so why should we expect anything different for the balance of prophecy yet to be fulfilled? The Lord Jesus Christ Himself said that "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away (Mark 13:31)." This

HERMENEUTICS	Page 3
HERMO08	a Grace Notes course

carries a clear cut implication that the Lord's words will be literally fulfilled, even though it may be cloaked in highly figurative language. Often times there is confusion in the terminology that is used. The "Literal" School of Interpretation recognizes types and symbols and means that the predicted events will be literally fulfilled. Some would argue that this is not being truly literal. A simple reading of the Song of Solomon though should let one realize that symbolic language is clearly employed in the Scriptures. We must be careful of allegorizing passages that are clearly prophetic in nature. We do not want to read our thoughts and viewpoints into the passage, but instead determine what God wants us to know.

We should seek to determine the exact meanings of the words that are used from the original languages. Many problems are cleared up when we take the simplest meaning of the words and avoid trying to read things into them. We must recognize the use of figurative language in the revelation of prophecy. Even though there is figurative language, once again, it will still have a literal fulfillment, since the figurative is a "shadow" of the reality it represents (Heb 10:1-14).

In seeking to interpret literally we must pay careful attention to the historical setting in which the prophecy was given. It is therefore extremely important to know chronology and the specified time frames of history. Literal interpretation means that the prophecy will have a literal fulfillment. Thus, when the Lord says that He will "come again," it refers to a literal return-not just "in the hearts of men."

We must realize that there is a harmony in prophecy as God is not a God of confusion (1 Cor 14:33). Where harmony does not exist between various passages, we must have the humility to shift our understanding and see the "picture" from a different perspective, by allowing our picture to include those pieces. Prophecy does not shift with our ideas, perspectives or desires. It is from God. We

must be the ones willing to make the changes. Sadly, history is full of examples of people who developed a system and then held on to it at all costs-in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Just consider the Pharisees.

The harmony of prophecy inherently involves the comparison of Scripture with Scripture. A specific event may be described in many different places in the Bible. For example, the end-time entity of Babylon (Rev 17-18) is also discussed in detail in Isaiah 13 and 47 and Jeremiah 50-51. Many people try to go to a prophetic book and interpret it as a finished, complete unit. While major points may be given in that book, there are frequently many other passages that fill in the details. We therefore must be very careful of what we develop and hold up as "doctrine." Jesus Christ said that He will return (John 14:1-3). That is doctrine. Whether it is Pre-Tribulational, Mid-Tribulational, Post-Tribulational, Pre-wrath or whatever other position may be presented, these are conclusions that are drawn by men based on how they see the evidence. The author, for example, holds very strong convictions that the Rapture of the Church will occur before the Tribulation, and firmly believes that that is what the evidence teaches, but because I or you hold a certain position does not mean that it is provable beyond any doubt.

Since the entirety of God's Word revolves around His Son, Jesus Christ, it is essential to interpret Christologically (1 Pet 1:10-1). This means that we should realize that Jesus Christ is at the center of all theology and all history. We are told that, "His testimony is the spirit of prophecy (Rev 19:10)." History is indeed "His Story" and is the unveiling of the Lord Jesus Christ. Prophecy is focused on that fact. If we cannot explain His relationship to the position we have taken, then the position needs to be reconsidered.

Prophecy must also recognize the fact that God has ordained different time frames called

Dispensations, in which certain methods are different. For example, in the second and third chapters of Revelation, there are letters written to seven different churches. Beginning with Chapter 4 all the way through Chapter 18, the church is not mentioned. Facts such as these must be considered when interpreting those chapters.

Another very important factor in the interpretation of prophecy is that we must determine if a given prophecy is fulfilled in the part, the whole or not at all. If it is totally fulfilled, it need not be repeated. If it is partially fulfilled, then it makes sense that the Lord will bring about similar circumstances so that the balance of the prophecy might be completed. After all, God is truth (Isa 65:16) and His Words are truth (2 Sam 7:28), so what He has had written must be literally true. If the prophecy is not yet fulfilled, then it will be.

Also widely recognized by those who diligently study prophecy is the principle of Double Reference. This involves two events that are widely separated in time and may be brought together in a single reference. The Lord Himself pointed this out when He read from Isaiah and said that today "this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing (Luke 4:21)." He is quoting from Isaiah 61:1-2, but if you will notice that He did not say the next phrase in Isaiah had been fulfilled. It says, "and the day of vengeance of our God," which is a reference to His Second Coming. God is not bound by time and sees the "end from the beginning (Rev 21:6; 22:13)," so it is not a problem for Him to include two events in one prophecy.

A final point to recognize in the interpretation of the prophetic word is that we must not only look for similarities in events, but for differences. The differences may often lead us to conclude that there are two events in view and not one. The return of the Lord is a good example. We are told in one passage that the saints will "meet Him in the air (1 Thes 4:13-18)." In another passage, we are told that, "His

feet will stand on the Mount of Olives," and it will split in two and He will go forth then to fight (Zech 14:1-5). In putting together the puzzle of the prophetic word, we must consider the differences.

### Interpretation of Prophecy (Rollin Chafer)

**Introduction:** "The *sine qua non* of true prophetic teaching is that it must persistently and consistently remain Scriptural. The testimony of the written word alone presents faithfully the future purposes of God and of Satan. To give room to fancy or to human wisdom and reasoning, is fatal in prophetic study. True prophetic teaching stands the test of time simply because it is Scriptural."<sup>1</sup>

Prophecy appears in the Bible with a two-fold purpose, the office of the prophet being designed to fulfill this two-fold purpose. The prophet was both a forth teller and a foreteller. He was both a teacher for the times in which he lived, and the instrument through whom God transmitted predictions for the future. The general rules of hermeneutics govern the interpretation of the first aspect. Besides these some special considerations should be heeded in connection with the interpretation of the predictive portions of prophecy.

### Predictive Prophecy Demands Literal Interpretation.

This is denied, of course, by those who spiritualize the prophetic Scriptures, but the Bible itself has established this rule governing prophetic interpretation by the fact that every record of fulfilled prophecy exhibits literal fulfillment in detail. This is manifested by the recurring use of the phrase in the New Testament, "that the Scriptures might be fulfilled," in connection with all the details of the predictions in the Old Testament concerning the Person, life, and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Also this is true of the

<sup>1</sup>

C. Fred Lincoln, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 94, p. 503.

fulfilled predictions concerning the nation Israel, and judgments meted out in history to the heathen nations. Even when the predictive portions are couched in figurative language, that which the figure stands for is to have a literal fulfillment. On the other hand, very much of predictive prophecy is given in nonfigurative, plainly understood language. To treat such language allegorically, placing an entirely different meaning upon the language than the plain intent of the words warrant, resolves itself into a revision of the Spirit Author's message. This some so-called interpreters do not hesitate to do.

### The Means Used Vary.

#### (1) Theophanic Manifestations.

- (a) Appearances in human form, as when the Angel of Jehovah appeared and conversed with men.
- (b) By an audible voice, as at the birth, baptism and transfiguration of the Lord. Also many instances recorded in the O.T.
- (c) Also in other forms, as through animals, example: Balaam's ass; through inanimate things, example: the burning bush.

#### (2) Visions, Dreams and States of Ecstasy.

- (a) Visions, such as Isaiah's vision of the Lord, high and lifted up in the temple.
- (b) Dreams, such as Jacob's at Bethel.
- (c) Prophetical Ecstasy, such as John experienced on Patmos.

One difference between Dream and Ecstasy is that the dream might come to a pagan, as in the case of Nebuchadnezzar; while ecstasy was the experience only of men of God, as Daniel, Isaiah or Ezekiel.

### Some Rules Governing the Interpretation of Prophecy.

- (1) The Source of Prophecy (2 Pet 1:21). Not by the will of men, but from God. This insures accuracy and trustworthiness (Isa 46:9-11).

(2) The Grand Divisions of Prophecy (1 Pet 1:10-12). The things related to the two advents—"the sufferings of Christ, and the glories that should follow them."

(3) The Central Person of Prophecy (Rev 19:10). Jesus Christ spoke through the prophets concerning Himself (Luke 24:27).

(4) The Fundamental Principle of Prophetic Interpretation (2 Pet 1:20). *Idias* (tr. private) is generally used in the sense of "one's own" (John 1:11; 1 Cor 12:11; Matt 14:13). Prophecy is a harmonious whole. No prophecy is to be interpreted by itself, but in the light of all God has spoken on the subject. It then follows:

(a) That if prophecy is a self-consistent whole, unfulfilled prophecy is as sure of fulfillment as was the case of any fulfilled prophecy.

(b) Moreover, the harmony of the prophetic Word does not allow for the erroneously-called Spiritual fulfillment of some prophecies while demanding the literal fulfillment of others.

(c) Although prophecy in some cases allows for partial fulfillment with a fuller and final consummation, the former must not be made the reason for denying the latter.

(d) As logic requires that cause must precede effect the application of this law will settle many controversies. Example: "If Christ's second coming is the cause of the millennium, as the trend of prophecy indicates, then His coming must be Premillennial." - Hopkins.

### Practical Value of the Study of Prophecy.

It reveals the purpose of God in Christ from the beginning to the final and sure triumph. The "night" is still in progress. Prophecy gives light on the path until the day dawn. Faith looks back to a finished work. Hope is tied to the sure

<b>HERMENEUTICS</b>	<b>Page 6</b>
<b>HERM008</b>	a Grace Notes course

word of prophecy, and dispels the gloom in the light of God's own predictions.

### **Exercises for HERM008**

1. What are some of the factors that make the interpretation of prophecy one of the most difficult areas in the Scriptures?
2. What reasons lead us to expect a literal fulfillment of prophecy?
3. What is essential in finding the harmony of prophecy?
4. Who should we find at the center of the prophetic word?
5. What role does "Dispensations" play in the study of prophecy?
6. Why is it important to determine the degree of fulfillment if a given prophecy?
7. Why is it important to look for differences in prophetic events?