

# Has the “Prophecy Bug” Bitten You?

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### Bitten!

Few things are as fascinating as predictions about the future. That's true even if the predictions are about something as unimportant as the outcome of a sporting event. But what if the predictions are about God's plan for the entire world? What if some person confidently teaches that his or her predictions are based upon the clear teaching of the Bible? Who can help but be intrigued?

Biblical prophecy grabs our attention. What is the biblical significance of 1948 and Israel's rebirth as a nation? Does the capture of Jerusalem by the Israelis in 1967 have prophetic importance? What role does the European Economic Union play in God's plan for the end times? How does the ongoing conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians fit into the prophetic timetable?

Shortly after becoming a Christian in 1969, I read Hal Lindsey's book, The Late Great Planet Earth. The "prophecy bug" bit hard! I was captivated. Lindsey explained the biblical prophecies so clearly. He outlined God's plan for Israel, Egypt, Russia, and China. It was all in the Bible! Most exciting of all, those prophecies were obviously just on the brink of being fulfilled! Jesus Christ was coming soon!

Since then I have continued to study the prophecies of the Bible. While I do not have all of the details figured out, I have learned some valuable lessons. They may not fit with what you have heard the popular prophecy teachers say, but have you ever considered that those teachers may be wrong?

### A Little History Helps

A major part of the fascination Christians have with biblical prophecy stems from its relevance. To think that the prophets of ancient Israel predicted events that are occurring in our own lifetimes! What a fortunate generation we are to be able to learn about current events and see how they all fit exactly into God's plan that was revealed centuries ago!

There is, however, one major problem. We are not the only Christians who have thought that the ancient prophecies of the Bible were being fulfilled in their lifetimes. In fact, almost every generation of Christians has thought that it was living in the final days before Christ's Second Coming!

In A.D. 378, the Goths annihilated the Roman emperor's army. In response, Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, proclaimed that "the end of the world is coming upon us."<sup>1</sup> Another early church leader, Apollinarius, arrived at 482 as the date for the Second Coming of Christ; he based his calculation on the sixty-two "sevens" of Daniel 9:26.<sup>2</sup> John Milton, author of Paradise Lost, witnessed England's civil war from 1642 to 1660 and concluded that Jesus would return soon. The Puritan preacher, John Cotton, predicted 1655 as the year when Antichrist's power would end. The following year, 1656, was Christopher Columbus's prediction for the end of the world. John Napier, the inventor of logarithms, used his new mathematical technique to compute 1688 as the

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<sup>1</sup> Russell Chandler, Doomsday (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1993), 119.

<sup>2</sup> Gleason L. Archer Jr., "Daniel," in The Expositors Bible Commentary, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 120.

date for Christ's return. Cotton Mather, another American Puritan preacher, predicted 1697 as the date of the end. Later he decided it would be 1736, but he eventually settled for 1716 as the correct date.<sup>3</sup>

In the nineteenth century William Miller gained a huge following by predicting that Jesus would return sometime between March 21, 1843 and March 21, 1844. When that prediction failed, he arrived at October 22, 1844 as the time for Christ's Second Coming.<sup>4</sup> Later Seventh Day Adventists built their case on Miller's reasoning but arrived at 1846, 1849, or 1851 as the date for Christ's return.<sup>5</sup>

The twentieth century was not without its predictions. William Branham, an early Pentecostal leader, gave 1977 as the date for the start of the millennium.<sup>6</sup> Chuck Smith of Calvary Chapel wrote in his 1979 book, Future Survival, "I'm convinced that the Lord is coming for His church before the end of 1981." In a May 1980 broadcast, Pat Robertson said, "I guarantee you by the fall of 1982 there is going to be a judgment on the world."<sup>7</sup> Edgar Whisenant, a former NASA engineer, wrote 88 Reasons Why The Rapture Could Be In 1988. Jack Van Impe proposed that 1976 was the date for the start of the Great Tribulation, but later he revised his predictions and suggested that October 1999 was the month of Jesus' return.<sup>8</sup>

Those are just a few of the many mistakes that have been made by Christians through the centuries! They all had their reasons for believing that they were living at the end of history, and they were all wrong. At the very least, this history lesson should make us pause before we confidently assert that the "signs of the times" all point to our Lord's return within our own lifetimes. C.S. Lewis presents us with a wise alternative: "As a Christian I take it for granted that human history will some day end; and I am offering Omniscience no advice as to the best date for that consummation."<sup>9</sup>

History teaches us another bitter lesson. Christians have not only made and believed erroneous predictions. When those predictions have failed, they have gone on to believe other predictions instead of calling the whole enterprise of forecasting the future into question.

Hal Lindsey is a good example. In 1970 he wrote in The Late Great Planet Earth, "Since the restoration of Israel in 1948, we have lived in the most significant period of prophetic history."<sup>10</sup> But in 1996 he wrote another book, Planet Earth--A.D. 2000. He had obviously change his mind. "As I have restudied the Book of Daniel recently, I have begun to see that the recapture of Jerusalem was much more important than even the taking and re-establishing of the nation of Israel."<sup>11</sup> One cannot help but ask how the capture of Jerusalem in 1967 replaced the founding of the nation of Israel in 1948 as the key date for understanding biblical prophecy. Was this change really the result of more Bible study, as he claimed, or simply the realization that his predictions based on the 1948 date had failed to materialize? Other questions naturally arise. If Lindsey was

<sup>3</sup> Paul Boyer, When Time Shall Be No More (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 64, 68, 56, 62, 69-70.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 81-84.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Kyle, Richard. The Last Days Are Here Again, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998), 91.

<sup>6</sup> B.J. Oropeza, 99 Reasons Why No One Knows When Christ Will Return (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 119.

<sup>7</sup> William M. Alnor, Soothsayers of the Second Advent (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1989), 41, 38.

<sup>8</sup> Oropeza, 99 Reasons, 81-84.

<sup>9</sup> C.S. Lewis, "Is Progress Possible?" in God in the Dock (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 312.

<sup>10</sup> Hal Lindsey, The Late Great Planet Earth (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), 62.

<sup>11</sup> Lindsey, Hal. Planet Earth--2000 A.D. (Palos Verde, CA: Western Front, Ltd., 1996), 173.

mistaken about the importance of 1948, then isn't it possible that some of Lindsey's other teachings were wrong? Furthermore, if he was wrong on such a major point in The Late Great Planet Earth, why should his readers have confidence in his latest book? Yet Lindsey's books continue to sell.

Historian Timothy Weber comments on this tendency of Christians to continue to listen to the latest prophecy teachers in spite of their ongoing mistakes:

Their leaders were confident *that* biblical prophecy was being fulfilled, but events kept forcing them to reevaluate their interpretations of how it was being fulfilled. One is struck by how forgiving and forgetful the . . . rank and file must have been during this period. They stuck by their leaders even when they misread the signs of the times. The leaders themselves seemed little deterred by their mistakes. Events were changing so quickly that they had little time for apologies. . .

. . . Some of the movements most respected teachers, not just a lonely eccentric here and there, have been "made ridiculous by current history." . . . They presented themselves as students of the "sure word of prophecy" who claimed to have an infallible guide for the unraveling of future events. No . . . Bible scholar claimed omniscience for his interpretations, but few showed much humility or tentativeness either.<sup>12</sup>

Those are harsh criticisms. Some Christians may think that such comments should not be aimed at other believers in Christ. Shouldn't we overlook previous generations' mistakes out of Christian love? But when the same mistakes are made by generation after generation of Christians, it is surely time to face up to our gullibility. In the interest of the welfare of future believers and out of concern for our witness to an unbelieving world, we need to learn the lesson of history: We Christians have all too often fallen for false predictions about the future.

But what about the moral degeneracy of our day? Isn't that a sure sign that the end must be near? Whenever someone asks me that question, I think of the following observation:

Who cannot see that the world is already in its decline, and no longer has the strength and vigor of former times? There is no need to invoke Scripture authority to prove it. The world tells its own tale and in its general decadence bears adequate witness that it is approaching its end . . . There is less innocence in the courts, less justice in the judges, less concord between friends, less artistic sincerity, less moral strictness.<sup>13</sup>

Is that an observation about modern America? No, it was made by Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage, around the year A.D. 250!

History shows all too convincingly that Christians are prone to be overly enthusiastic in identifying current events with the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. This poor track record can lead to cynicism about trying to understand biblical prophecy, but it can also spur us into more careful study of what the Bible actually teaches.

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<sup>12</sup> Timothy P. Weber, Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 201-202.

<sup>13</sup> Boyer, When Time Shall, 231-232.

## Guidelines

In my study of biblical prophecy, I have arrived at four guidelines that can help Christians discern what the Bible teaches about the future. Much more could be said on the subject, but these four guidelines alone will help us steer clear of the most common mistakes.

Please be prepared for some of my comments to question things that you have been told that the Bible "clearly teaches." Don't reject what I write just because it is different from what you have heard from other Christian teachers or just because it goes against what evangelical Christians often believe. Think about these guidelines, and then be sure to go back and study God's Word for yourself. Remember that neither I nor any other teacher are the ultimate authority. We must measure all teaching against the truth found in God's Word.

### *#1 Do not let the minors crowd out the majors.*

When reading the Bible we should always look for the major themes of the Bible. Is it Russia's attack on Israel? Is it the identity of the Antichrist? Is it the timing of the rapture?

None of those things constitute major themes in the Bible. They may be mentioned, but out of the whole sixty-six books of the Bible, they are relatively minor. The main message of the Bible is about Jesus Christ. The coming of Christ was predicted by the Old Testament prophets. The New Testament tells us that the Son of God came to earth and that he was crucified on the cross for the punishment of sin. Three days later he rose again from the dead, and he now sits at the right hand of God the Father. Jesus offers salvation to each one of us. He promises that if we confess our unworthiness to him and trust in his sacrificial death upon the cross, then he will freely give us salvation. He will reconcile us to his Father.

That's what the Bible is all about. It's not about the name of the church that you attend. It's not about the version of the Bible that you read. It's not about the kind of Christian music that you enjoy. Neither is it about the details of Biblical prophecy. The major message of the Bible is that for his own glory God has provided salvation through his Son, and he invites all of us to experience that salvation by trusting in Christ.

How tragic that some Christians become so consumed with the details of what they think the Bible says about the future that they lose sight of the main message of the Bible! Please do not become so fascinated with the Antichrist or with what someone says are the "signs of the times" that you neglect the major message of prophecy which is Jesus Christ himself! Concentrate on him, and you won't go wrong.

When it comes to this subject of Bible prophecy, we Christians sometimes act like utter fools. In 1870, George Müller, the famous English preacher best known for his founding of orphanages and his life of faith, warned against overconfidence in promoting detailed schemes about the future.

We should not be too hasty in forming a judgment that because a certain event has taken place, therefore at a particular time it is certain the Lord Jesus will return. Otherwise, when the time shall have passed, . . . unbelievers may turn round and say, "The time has

passed, and the Lord Jesus, of Whose return you talked so much, has not come. . .”  
 We should be careful not to give a handle to those who speak evil of the truth.<sup>14</sup>

Good advice! Müller's contemporaries needed to hear it in the nineteenth century, and we need to hear it today. Let's not give the unbelieving world good reason to ridicule our faith.

There's another danger that we must be on guard against. Let's learn from the experience of Henry Frost, who was the American director of the China Inland Mission in the early part of the twentieth century.

The time came . . . when I discovered that prophetic study had become somewhat of a snare to me. I had reached the point where my interest was centering in what I may call the curiosities of the Scriptures and where I was more anxious to learn about the things which were new than to put into practical use those which were old. . . I now realized, whatever events were to take place in the days to come and however important these were, that there were also present days to be faced, with their pressing opportunities and obligations. Hence, it became my longing to know what sort of a Christian God would have me be, what kind of service He expected me to render, and what were the privileges in Christ which He had set before me.<sup>15</sup>

Henry Frost's early experience with biblical prophecy is too common among Christians. Study prophecy, but please don't let it detract you from loving Jesus Christ and living for him now. Daily obedience to our Lord may not be as exciting as figuring out what 666 means. We may be intrigued by the possible role of the United Nations in the end times. All of us would like to know what "the mark of the beast" is. But are those topics as important as learning how to live in loving obedience to Jesus? Please don't let the minors crowd out the majors!

*#2 Do not be afraid of admitting that some prophecies are hard to understand.*

In his second New Testament letter, the apostle Peter admits that there are some things in Paul's writings that are hard to understand (2 Pet. 3:16). If Peter can say that about Paul, then why should we be hesitant about making the same admission when it comes to some biblical prophecies? Christians who are equally committed to the inspiration and authority of the Bible have come to different conclusions about what those prophecies teach. Let's feel free to admit that.

What are some of the prophecies that are hard to understand? Daniel 9:24-27 is certainly one. Most popular books on the end times will present Daniel's prophecy about the seventy weeks as straightforward and easily understandable teaching that every sincere Bible student agrees on. Do some research by looking at a detailed commentary on Daniel. You will soon discover that Christian scholars who are equally committed to the inspiration of the Bible have come to different conclusions about what the seventy weeks represent.

If the commentaries don't convince you, try an experiment. Put aside all of the

<sup>14</sup> Roger Steer, ed., The George Müller Treasury (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1987), 143.

<sup>15</sup> Henry W. Frost, Miraculous Healing (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972), 10-11.

commentaries, and study Daniel 9 for yourself! Write down the conclusions that you come to about all that the passage says. Then see if your conclusions match what others tell you that Daniel 9:24-27 teaches. That simple exercise alone will persuade you to be careful when it comes to biblical prophecy.

Daniel 9:24-27 has been called the "Dismal Swamp" of Old Testament studies.<sup>16</sup> One recent writer comments, "The difficulty of the verses which now lie before us is evident to anyone who has even attempted a cursory examination of them. . . Pick up almost any two commentaries from the same school of eschatology and it is not likely that there will be agreement on the meaning of all the details of interpretation."<sup>17</sup>

What about the book of Revelation? Once again you find that Christians devoted to the authority of God's Word have come to different conclusions. Some think that the prophecy of Revelation was fulfilled in the first century. Others see the fulfillment throughout church history. Some say that Revelation's predictions have yet to be fulfilled, and still others say that John's book spoke in general terms and cannot be limited to any time frame.

Consider Ezekiel 38 and 39, a prophecy that often forms a prominent part of contemporary prophetic teaching. "The word of the Lord came to me: 'Son of man, set your face against Gog, of the land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal; prophesy against him and say . . .'" (Ezek. 38:1-2). Contemporary prophecy teachers frequently say that *Meshech* is a tribe of people whose name evolved into *Moscow* and that *Tubal* can be equated with the modern Russian city of Tobolsk. The word that the New International Version translates as "chief" is the word *Rosh*. Therefore, most of the popular prophecy teachers conclude that Ezekiel 38 and 39 teach about the future of Russia.<sup>18</sup>

That's exciting! It grabs our attention. But is it true? No.

. . . the identifications of Meshech and Tubal have for a long time not been in doubt. All informed references and studies acknowledge that the association with Moscow and Tobolsk is untenable. . . .

Since the late nineteenth century, Assyrian texts have been available which locate Mushku (Meshech) and Tabal (Tubal) in central and eastern Anatolia [Asia Minor] respectively.<sup>19</sup>

. . . even if one were to transliterate the Hebrew *r\_ 'sh* as a proper name . . . , it can have nothing to do with modern "Russia." This would be a gross anachronism, for the modern name is based upon the name *Rus*, which was brought into the region of Kiev, north of the Black Sea, by the Vikings only in the Middle Ages.<sup>20</sup>

It is hard to know exactly who Gog and Magog are. Let's not be afraid to admit that.

I find it amazing (and somewhat infuriating) that prophecy teachers can develop elaborate and intricate chronologies about end time events and write book after book suggesting how these prophecies are on the verge of being fulfilled, but they rarely if ever tell their readers that they are

<sup>16</sup> J.A. Montgomery, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1927), 400.

<sup>17</sup> Robert D. Culver, Daniel and the Latter Days (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1954), 135.

<sup>18</sup> Lindsey, The Late Great, 64-65.

<sup>19</sup> Edwin M. Yamauchi, Foes from the Northern Frontier (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1982), 24-25.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 20.

basing their ideas on passages that are hard to understand. Frankly, that is irresponsible.

What does this mean for you and me? It means that we need to become discriminating readers. Don't immediately swallow everything you're told. (That includes what you read in this booklet!) It also means that we need to be careful about the prominence that we allow the interpretation of Biblical prophecy to have within the church.

Let's allow Christians to disagree over their interpretations of biblical prophecy instead of forcing just one interpretation to be adopted as *the* right one. Let's be careful before we say that "Bible scholars agree" or that "the Bible clearly teaches."

If you have read some of the popular Left Behind series, please understand that you are reading just one interpretation of Biblical prophecy. That interpretation is called dispensational premillennialism. You will probably not find that term in the novels, but that is the technical name for it. Unique features of this interpretation include the rapture of Christians seven years before Christ's Second Coming, the Antichrist's covenant with Israel, his breaking of that covenant after three and a half years, the 144,000 Jewish witnesses for Jesus, a restored Roman Empire, and the battle of Armageddon in the Jezreel Valley in northern Israel. It may surprise you to learn that those teachings are elements of only one interpretation, but it's true.

Dispensational premillennialism may be the right interpretation; it may be the wrong interpretation. But please understand that it is just one interpretation of prophecy. Other Christians who are equally committed to the inspiration and authority of God's Word have studied the Bible and come to different conclusions.

### *#3 Look for what the prophecy meant to the first people who heard it.*

Before you think about how a prophecy might apply to the contemporary scene, be sure that you find out what it meant to the people who heard it centuries ago. The prophets delivered their prophecies first to the people of their own day. Try to put yourself in those people's position, and then ask yourself what the prophet's message would have meant to them.

Consider Tim LaHaye's comments on Ezekiel 37, the famous chapter about the valley of the dry bones. Ezekiel records that vision in order to demonstrate how God is going to bring his people back to their homeland. LaHaye interprets the vision solely in terms of the events of 1948 when the modern day nation of Israel came into existence.<sup>21</sup> He never once mentions that perhaps Ezekiel 37 contains a message for the people who are living when the prophet Ezekiel originally gives the prophecy! The people in Ezekiel's day are living in exile in Babylon. They wonder if they will ever get to go back home. Could it be that the prophecy of the dry bones was fulfilled not in 1948 but in 539 B.C. when the Israelites returned to their homeland? Yet LaHaye never even asks that question! Again that is an irresponsible handling of God's Word.

Let's consider another example. The book of Revelation captures our attention because of its vivid and puzzling images. We immediately want to know what the seals and trumpets and bowls represent. When a prophecy teacher interprets them for us in terms of contemporary military technology or present-day political realities, Revelation becomes even more fascinating. But John writes Revelation for Christians living in the first century. Those Christians are being

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<sup>21</sup> Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. Are We Living in the Last Days? (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999), 49-55.

persecuted by the Roman Empire for their faith in Jesus. So the first question we should ask is how those early Christians will understand the book of Revelation.

If Revelation is only a description of events in the far distant future, what relevance will it have for the early Christians? People who are being persecuted need something to encourage them in their oppressive circumstances. How will a description of events in the twenty-first century encourage the early Christians? When reading Revelation, we should start by asking what the terms and images mean to the first century Christians who are being persecuted by the Romans. That's not necessarily easy to figure out. It's more exciting to jump right to the twenty-first century, but we must resist that urge no matter how strong it is. First, think through the message of Revelation for the early Christians, and only then think about how that message applies to Christians today.

This guideline is so crucial that we need to consider one more example. In Matthew 24 and 25 we find Jesus' most extensive teaching about future events. Since he delivers this teaching on the Mount of Olives, it is usually referred to as Jesus' Olivet Discourse. Matthew 24:4-14 describes how false prophets will claim to be the Christ and how Christians will be persecuted for their faith. Wars and famines and earthquakes will also occur. Verses 15 through 21 contain instructions to Jesus' followers to flee from Jerusalem when they see certain events taking place. Some prophecy teachers say that the predictions of verses 4-14 will be fulfilled in the period leading up to the seven year tribulation and that verses 15 through 21 apply to the tribulation itself.<sup>22</sup>

The problem with that interpretation becomes apparent when we ask whether the disciples who are with Jesus on the Mount of Olives will understand it this way. How will they know that Jesus is talking about what will happen to a future generation of Christians instead of what will happen to them? In fact, isn't it natural for them to think that their Master's teaching applies to them?

Jesus answered, "Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come." (Matt. 24:4-6)

When the disciples standing on the Mount of Olives with Jesus hear him say "you," don't they naturally conclude that he is referring to them and not some future generation?

Let's take this line of thinking a step further. Instead of thinking of the disciples on the Mount of Olives, think about those early Christians who first read Matthew's book. What do they think that Jesus is teaching? Does Matthew give any indication that Jesus is addressing the needs of future Christians and not those of the first century? Is there anything found *in what Matthew records* that tells us that we should think of these events as occurring in the tribulation or the years preceding it?

Prophecy teachers would probably say that their interpretation comes not solely from Matthew but also from Revelation. When Matthew 24 and 25 are read in light of Revelation's teaching, they would say, *then* it becomes clear that these events are describing the time shortly

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<sup>22</sup> John F. Walvoord, The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 87.

before the seven-year tribulation. But we need to remember that the disciples with Jesus on the Mount of Olives and the first readers of Matthew's Gospel do not have the book of Revelation as a reference! Revelation is written several decades after Matthew finishes his book, and the New Testament books are not circulated together until some time in the second century. Appealing to Revelation in order to provide the basic framework for understanding the Olivet Discourse means that the earliest Christians are missing the essential key to understanding what Jesus is actually teaching! It's hard to believe that Jesus so deliberately misleads them.

These examples from Ezekiel, Revelation, and Matthew amply demonstrate the point. When you are reading a prophecy in the Bible, look for what the prophecy meant to the first people who heard it. The prophecy does have relevance in our lives, but we must start with what it meant to the original audience.

#### *#4 Look for the central and abiding truth of the prophecy.*

Instead of getting bogged down in fascinating details, find the central message that the passage teaches about God and his work in the world.

Apply that guideline to Ezekiel 38 and 39. If you take the time to read all through those two chapters, you find that the events that are described are not difficult to understand. Ezekiel goes into a lot of detail about those events, but we can summarize them very quickly: Gog and Magog are going to attack Israel, but they will not be successful. Ezekiel delivers that basic message in a variety of ways, but the central teaching of chapters 38 and 39 is *that* simple.

God is going to protect his people. Furthermore, that protection will demonstrate to the world who God truly is. God will again prove himself to be faithful and holy. "I will make known my holy name among my people Israel. I will no longer let my holy name be profaned, and the nations will know that I the Lord am the Holy One in Israel" (Ezek. 39:7).

Ezekiel's vision is about future events, but he concludes his message with an application to the people living with him as refugees in Babylon. (It is addressed to Jacob. Jacob is another name for Israel.) "Therefore this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will now bring Jacob back from captivity and will have compassion on all the people of Israel, and I will be zealous for my holy name" (Ezekiel 39:25).

So what is the central and abiding truth of this prophecy? God's purposes for his people do not change. His desire is that he will be honored among his people as he deserves. He wants his people to experience his compassion and to know his provision. That was his desire for the people living with Ezekiel in Babylon, and that will be his desire in the distant future when the enemy is no longer Babylon but the mysterious Gog and Magog. It doesn't make any difference which nation is the current superpower. God is still going to accomplish his purposes. We don't really need to know who Gog and Magog are because the important thing is that we know who God is. He is the living God whose purpose is still to prove himself holy and show himself faithful among his people!

It is easy to critique other Christians' opinions about the end times, but can something positive be said on this subject? If Christians have been wrong in the past, dare we make any statements about the Bible's teaching on Christ's Second Coming?

For my ordination I was required to write and defend a personal doctrinal statement. I spent a lot of time studying what God's Word says about the end times as I crafted my own viewpoint on this controversial subject. I summarized my position this way:

I believe in the personal second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ (Luke 21:27). This doctrine is found throughout the New Testament and emphasizes the following elements:

1. The appearance of Christ will be a revelation to all creation of his glory and power (Matt. 24:30; 2 Thess. 1:10). Every person will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil. 2:11).
2. The second coming will consummate the salvation of the redeemed, but it will entail judgment for the wicked (Heb. 9:28; Rev. 20:11-15; 1 Peter 5:4).
3. Believers can be assured that justice will finally be established on earth despite all appearances to the contrary (2 Thess. 1:4-7). In anticipation of the resurrection of the dead, they can be comforted as they face death (1 Thess. 4:18; 5:10).
4. In light of the coming revelation of the Lord Jesus, Christians are called upon to persevere in holiness and service (1 Thess. 5:11; 2 Peter 3:11-14, Matt. 24:31-46; 1 John 3:3).

Though it has been many years since I wrote that statement, I still stand by it. In fact, I am more convinced now than then about the importance of those four points. They summarize the major themes of the Bible's teachings on this subject, and they also provide the best repellent available for "prophecy bug." Concentrating on these four elements will keep us from making the same mistakes that history amply demonstrates that previous generations of Christians have made.

The thrust of that teaching can be remembered with the acronym, S-U-R-E. Here are four things that you can be *sure* of when it comes to the Bible's teaching about the future.

S = Second Coming of Christ. The Bible teaches that Jesus is going to return to this earth. The New Testament is clear about that. Even people who don't believe what the Bible says about the future will acknowledge that the Bible does teach that Christ is going to come again.

U = Unrighteous will be judged. When Jesus returns to this earth, there will be a judgment. Those who have refused to submit to God will receive their just reward.

R = Righteous will be redeemed. Those who have trusted in Christ as Lord are those who have been made righteous in him, and they will experience the fullness of their salvation.

E = Encouragement. This is the purpose behind prophecy. Biblical prophecy promises us

that the injustices of this world will not continue forever. So we don't need to sink into despair over the unfairness of life. We should take encouragement from God's promise that justice will be done.

### That's All?

My four-point summary may seem disappointing. Can't anything more be said on this subject? What about the rapture of the church and the future of Israel's conflict with its neighbors? What about the Antichrist and "the mark of the beast"?

For the Christian excitement about the future comes not from forecasts about international politics but from anticipation of seeing Jesus. We don't need speculative interpretations in order to be filled with anticipation for the day we see Christ. Our eagerness comes not from knowing *when* we will see him but from knowing that we *will* see him.

Knowing that we will see Jesus himself should be enough to change the way we live. Peter says, "What kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming" (2 Peter 3:11b-12a). John gives the same message: "We know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in them purify themselves, just as he is pure" (1 John 3:2b-3). There is the true source of our fervor. Someday we will see our Lord!

Since God's Word does promise us that our Lord is coming back to this earth, let's prepare ourselves for his arrival. We do so not by making predictions but by learning to live in obedience and love. Augustine summarized it well centuries ago when he said, "The one who loves the coming of the Lord is not the person who affirms it is far off, nor is it the person who says it is near. It is the one who whether it be far or near, awaits it with sincere faith, steadfast hope, and fervent love."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Stephen Travis, The Jesus Hope (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1974), 88.

## RECOMMENDED READING

- Boyer, Paul. 1992. When Time Shall Be No More. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Boyer provides an excellent history and analysis of recent American dispensational premillennialism.
- Oropeza, B.J. 1994. 99 Reasons Why No One Knows When Christ Will Return. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. Oropeza gives a critique of prophetic teaching and points toward the correct direction to follow.
- Pate, C. Marvin and Calvin B. Haines Jr. 1995. Doomsday Delusions. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. The authors discuss how to interpret biblical prophecy in general and then examine some specific Bible passages. They then investigate the harmful effects that erroneous teaching has produced in church history.