

END TIMES LESSON 6 | *Guidelines for Interpreting Prophecy*

1. General Observations.

- a. A prophet may speak of future things as in the past (Is 53), in the present (Is 9:6), or in the future. There are prophetic past, prophetic present, and prophetic future tenses.
- b. A prophet can see many things together that are widely separated in fulfilment. This is because the prophets saw the future in space rather than in time. From their perspective, the whole appears *foreshortened*.
- c. Two events, widely separated as to the time of their fulfilment, may be brought together into one prophecy. This is often because a prophet has a message for his own time as well as for a future time. This is called the *law of double reference*. It is *not* a law of double fulfilment.
 - (1) “It frequently happened that prophets who had to speak of such things were also commissioned to predict other things which would shortly come to pass; and the verification of these latter predictions in their own day and generation justified men in believing the other utterances which pointed to a more distant time. The one was practically a ‘sign’ of the other, and if the one proved true the other might be trusted.”¹
 - (2) The near and far view is given in such a way that the fulfilment of the near (Ge 21:1-3; Is 37:36) assures the fulfilment of far (Ge 12:3; Is 40-66).
- d. Some prophecies are *absolute*. Others are *conditional*.
 - (1) Many prophecies are expressly or impliedly unconditional (Ge 9:11; Ps 110:4; Da 2:45).
 - (a) All promises of the unconditional covenants (Noahic, Abrahamic, Davidic, and New) are unconditional with respect to Israel as a nation. However, individuals may freely choose to forfeit his or her connection to these unconditional covenants (He 12:16-17). Likewise, we get to conditionally choose whether we would like to be a recipient of the New covenant that is unconditional.
 - (2) Some prophecies are expressly or impliedly conditional (Le 26; Dt 28; Jon 3:4). However, there are not hidden conditions connected with every prophecy. One cannot imply conditions where none are stated in the passage or relevant cross references.
 - (a) The condition is usually turning from evil (Je 18:7-10; 26:12-13; Eze 33)
 - (3) Some prophecies are unconditional as to ultimate fulfilment but conditional as to the time and place of their fulfilment (Mt 23:37-39).
 - (a) “Times and seasons may be modified, days may be shortened, events may be accelerated or delayed, individuals and nations may come within the scope of the promises or may stand outside; but the events themselves are ordered and sure, sealed with God’s oath, and guaranteed by His very life.”²
- e. Regarding form, prophets naturally speak in terms of their own culture and experience (a “president” would be called a “king”; northern Iraq would be called “Assyria,” etc.).

¹ R. B. Girdlestone, *The Grammar of Prophecy*, 21.

² R. B. Girdlestone, *The Grammar of Prophecy*, 28ff.

2. Guidelines for Prophetic Interpretation.

a. Straightforward Prophecies.

- (1) As with biblical interpretation in general, follow the *literal, grammatical, historical method*. Pay attention to words, grammar, figurative language, context, and history.
 - (a) Assume the literal meaning is the prophet's meaning, and that he is moving among realities and concrete things, not symbols and abstractions.
 - (b) Understand the historical background of the prophet and prophecy. Historical study is the first starting point in the study of prophecy.
- (2) Determine which elements of the prophecy are local to the prophet's time and place.
- (3) Be alert for *double reference* (*not* double fulfilment), especially in the major prophets (*Isaiah, Ezekiel*). Prophecies concerning Israel's Babylonian captivity, the day of Yahweh, Israel's return from Babylon, her worldwide dispersion, and her future regathering can be closely grouped together.
- (4) Remember the principle of *foreshortening*, where events widely separated as to time are entreated within one prophecy (i.e., the first and second comings of Jesus or the second and third dispersions of the Jews). Future events are often placed side by side when in fulfilment there is a great gap.
- (5) Determine whether the prophecy is conditional or unconditional
- (6) Determine whether the prophecy is fulfilled or unfulfilled.
- (7) Interpret individual prophecies in harmony with the entire Bible's prophetic programme (2 Pe 1:20-21). Look up relevant cross-references and parallel passages.
 - (a) **2 Pe 1:20-21** 20 ...Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. 21 For no prophecy was ever produced by the desire of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.
- (8) Interpret prophecy messianically. The central theme of all prophecy is Jesus (1 Pe 1:10-11; Re 19:10).
 - (a) **Re 19:10** 10 For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.

b. Prophetic Types.

- (1) A type is a *predetermined* representative relation that certain *historical* persons, events, institutions, offices, actions, and things of the Old Testament bear to corresponding *historical* persons, events, institutions, offices, actions, and things in the New.
- (2) That which is symbolised, the *antitype*, is the ideal or ultimate reality. It corresponds to the *type* and transcends or fulfils it.
- (3) Typology differs from prophecy only in the means of prediction. Prophecy *foretells* through words; typology *prefigures* through persons, events, institutions, offices, actions, and things.
- (4) The type has its own historical place and meaning, independent of that which it prefigures (Nu 21:9; Jn 3:14-15). It effectively prefigures the antitype precisely because it is efficacious in its own setting.
 - (a) **Nu 21:9** 9 So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.
 - (b) **Jn 3:14-15** 14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

- (5) It often takes the New Testament to understand that the Old Testament person, event, institution, office, action, or thing was a type. At the time, many types are not comprehended.
 - (6) The *essence* of the type must be distinguished from its accessories. We must expect agreement in many particulars, *but not all* (*i.e.*, Joseph's life compared to Jesus').
 - (7) The only sure authority for the application of a type is to be found in Scripture. The mere perception of an analogy will not suffice. A special *divine intent* must be evident (*i.e.*, the exodus generation as a type of a believer who fails and the conquest generation as a type of a believer who succeeds; see 1 Co 10:1-5; also see Stephen's speech in Ac 7).
 - (a) "...[S]omething more is wanted than mere resemblance. The [type] must not only resemble the [antitype], but must have been *designed* to resemble the latter. It must have been so designed *in its original institution*. It must have been designed as *preparatory* to the latter. The type, as well as the antitype, must have been preordained, and they must have been preordained as constituent parts of the same general scheme of Divine Providence. It is this *previous design* and this *preordained connexion* which constitute the relation of type and antitype."³
 - (8) A type differs from allegory. Types and antitypes are tied to historical reality. Allegories are tied only to the imagination. The biblical use of typology *does not* warrant the allegorical method of interpretation in general.
- c. Prophetic Parables.
- (1) A parable is an imaginative narrative constructed to communicate important truth. Unlike types, parables are not tied to history.
 - (2) In interpreting prophetic parables, these rules should followed:
 - (a) Pay close attention to whom Jesus is speaking and when.
 - (b) Seek to understand local customs, practices, and elements that form the main part of the parable.
 - (c) Find out whether Jesus himself interpreted the parable.
 - (d) Look for clues in the context as to the parable's meaning. The most likely interpretation is the one most easily comprehended by the original audience.
 - (e) Determine the one central truth the parable is teaching. All parts must be explained in harmony with this one central truth. Separate the essential from the non-essential. Don't make a parable "walk on all fours."
 - (f) Don't establish doctrine based on parables. Doctrines may be illustrated or confirmed by parables, but they must not derive exclusively or primarily from parables.
 - (g) Maintain the biblical distinction between Israel and the church (*i.e.*, Mt 25).

³ Bishop Marsh, quoted in J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 109.