

No Private Interpretation

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The four gospels provide the foundation for most aspects of Christianity, "Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:20). Of course, the life of Jesus shows us how to live. His teachings expand on and give the spirit of God's revelation in the Old Testament. In the Olivet Prophecy, Jesus builds the framework on which we can understand prophecy, especially for the times immediately ahead.

Conversely, the gospel accounts also touch on the negative side of many of these areas. They provide multiple parables, principles, and anecdotes of how *not* to live. In the four books, we see the teachings of the Pharisees and their harmful, narrow-minded misunderstanding of God's law. And also in the gospels, as an undercurrent that runs throughout Christ's ministry, lurks the disastrous effects of misinterpreting prophecy.

On such misinterpretations, the apostle Peter sounds a grave warning in his second epistle, written shortly before he died:

We also have the prophetic word made more sure, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. (II Peter 1:19-21)

This warning is immensely instructive. First, Peter assures us that biblical prophecy is "more sure" than even eyewitness testimony (verses 16-18)! When God speaks, whatever He foretells *will* happen! God's Word will not return to Him empty; it will accomplish what God sends it to do (Isaiah 55:11).

Second, the apostle says we would "do well to heed" it. Prophecy is vital to our growth! It strengthens our faith in God, teaches us how He works, and gives us a guide to His purpose for humanity. Until Christ returns, we need to study the prophecies to understand where we are and what God is doing.

Third, Peter sounds his warning note: Do not presume to believe that your particular understanding of prophecy is THE correct one! He emphasizes that this is the "first" rule of studying prophecy, something we must arm ourselves with at the outset. We must be humble enough to realize that our interpretation of prophecy is *probably wrong*!

God's thoughts are far higher than ours (Isaiah 55:8-9); He does not think as humans do. Although we are surely growing in transforming our minds to be like Christ's (I Corinthians 2:16; Ephesians 4:13, 15; Philippians 2:5; II Peter 3:18), we still have a long way to go! Paul puts it another way: "For *now we see in a mirror, dimly*, but then [in the resurrection] face to face. *Now I know in part*, but then I shall know just as I also am known" (I Corinthians 13:12; emphasis ours throughout). Or, as he quotes Isaiah in I Corinthians 2:9, "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him."

We, in this fleshly form, with our limited minds and perspectives, just do not know it all yet!

Expecting the Messiah

Paul makes an insightful observation about his fellow Israelites:

For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. (Romans 10:2-3)

The Pharisees stand as a prime example of Israelites "seeking to establish their own righteousness." In the same way the Pharisees approached God's law, likewise did first-century Jews deal with prophecy. We can see this in their reactions to the Messiah, Jesus the Christ.

A central theme of the Old Testament is the coming of the Messiah. From Genesis 3:15 through Malachi 4:2, prophecies of the coming of the Savior fill God's Word. The gospel writers show time and again how Jesus fulfilled the prophets' predictions in His actions or in the actions of those around Him. Matthew, especially, makes a conscious point to highlight many Old Testament prophecies that were fulfilled in Jesus' life, quoting Scripture to validate his claims.

Thus, the Jews had the prophecies of God's Word, as well as the life and words of Jesus—their God, Yahweh—to give unassailable proof that prophetic events were happening before their eyes. What more did they need? Did they even use the knowledge available to them? No! Paul says they avoid submitting to God's knowledge and instead establish their own!

Notice a scene recorded in John 7:25-27:

Then some of them from Jerusalem said, "Is this not He whom they [the Jewish authorities] seek to kill? But look! He speaks boldly, and they say nothing to Him. Do the rulers know indeed that this is truly the Christ? However, we know where this Man is from; but *when the Christ comes, no one knows where He is from.*"

Here is a private interpretation, if there ever was one! Nowhere in the Old Testament does it say that no one would know where the Messiah was from. In fact, it says just the opposite! Matthew shows that Micah 5:2 names Bethlehem in Judah as the town in which He would be born, and that Isaiah 9:1-2 identifies Galilee as where He would launch His ministry.

Where did the Jews get such an outrageous, unbiblical idea? It was someone's private opinion that, over time, had become tradition, an accepted "fact." It became a proverb, a saying, that is just as true as, "If you touch a toad, you'll get warts."

Is it any wonder that the people argued about Him so much? Earlier in John 7, we see some of this:

And there was much murmuring among the people concerning Him. Some said, "He is good"; others said, "No, on the contrary, He deceives the people." (verse 12)

They had no idea what to expect because they were burdened by their traditional yet wrong understanding about the Messiah.

Even John the Baptist had trouble shedding his preconceived baggage in respect to Jesus:

And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples and said to Him, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?" (Matthew 11:2-3)

Jesus' reply points us back to the prophecies of what the Messiah would do:

Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me." (Matthew 11:4-6)

Luke 4:17-21 shows that Jesus reminded John of the prophecy about Him in Isaiah 61:1-2. His fulfillment of this prophecy was incontrovertible evidence—real proof—that Jesus was the Messiah. Yet even John, whom Jesus praised as among the greatest men ever born (Matthew 11:11), could not be sure of the prophecies until *after* they were fulfilled!

Deadly Misinterpretation

Perhaps the most vivid example of a tragic misinterpretation of prophecy is found in the life of Judas Iscariot. His misconception about the coming of the Messiah resulted in the betrayal and death of Jesus and his own subsequent death by suicide. If Judas had not misinterpreted prophecy, he probably would not have done what he did.

Scholars suggest that Judas may have been the only Judean among Jesus' twelve disciples. If true, this element alone could have caused him to feel somewhat superior to his fellow disciples, as Judeans considered Galileans to be "country bumpkins." When Jesus gave him charge of the money box, it may have additionally boosted his ego.

His resume may also have included identification as a Zealot, an attribute held by only one other disciple, Simon the Zealot. How do we know that Judas had ties to the Zealots? By his surname, Iscariot. Researchers believe this name is a form of the title *sicarii*, meaning "dagger-men," a group of ultra-Zealots who carried a knife with them at all times to be prepared to assassinate traitors and capitulators. In English, we could call him "Judas Daggerman."

Though the Zealots were motivated primarily by socio-economic and political factors, prophetic ideas also drove them. They believed that if they turned Israel back to God and incited war against the Romans, the Messiah would arise to lead them and establish His Kingdom. This "understanding" resulted from misinterpreting many prophecies concerning Christ's comings. In short, the Zealots ignored many of the prophecies regarding His first coming and completely mis-timed those about the second.

Initially, Christ's message probably aroused great excitement among the Zealots and their sympathizers. His early public teachings, in which He rarely mentions having to die for the sins of the world, seemed to fit their expectations of a Messiah who would turn the people back to God. The accompanying miracles, healings, and exorcisms of demons only added to their "proof." Here was a righteous Jew, a descendant of David, who could lead them to victory over the Romans and usher in God's Kingdom!

Judas must have been thrilled! Jesus the Messiah had chosen him to be one among twelve—and had appointed him treasurer, too! Surely, he would be a mighty king in the New World Order that they would establish! It was more than he had ever hoped or dreamed!

Yet, at some point, Jesus' message began to alter. He frequently told His disciples that He would die—by crucifixion, of all things!—and that it was a primary reason for His coming. Judas began to notice that Jesus' references

to the Kingdom contradicted his own ideas of it. How could this be right? Daniel had prophesied of the Messiah's coming at this time to set up the Kingdom that "shall stand forever" (Daniel 2:44; 7:13-14, 27; 9:24-25). Jesus, Judas thought, is speaking and acting like a false Messiah!

He began to find fault with the things Jesus said and did. He began to steal from the money box, either for his own ends or maybe to fund some of the activities of the *sicarii*. Once, in Bethany, he even complained aloud of his displeasure to Jesus:

Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil. Then one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, who would betray Him, said, "Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" This he said, not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it. (John 12:3-6)

When Jesus gently rebuked him for his comment (Mark 14:6-9), Judas was incensed! Luke 22:3-6 tells what happened next:

Then Satan entered Judas, surnamed Iscariot, who was numbered among the twelve. So he went his way and conferred with the chief priests and captains, how he might betray Him to them. And they were glad, and agreed to give him money. Then he promised and sought opportunity to betray Him to them in the absence of the multitude.

Not even Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem as King of Israel could dissuade him from his course. Judas had convinced himself that Jesus was a false Messiah and that He had to pay for His deception!

So Judas betrayed Jesus, who was arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced to die—just as He had foretold! With the prophecies fulfilled before his eyes, Judas Iscariot saw how He had misunderstood all along:

Then Judas, His betrayer, seeing that He had been condemned, was remorseful and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." And they said, "What is that to us? You see to it!" Then he threw down the pieces of silver in the temple and departed, and went and hanged himself. (Matthew 27:3-5)

It was too late. All the remorse in the world could not undo the damage he had caused—he had condemned the Savior of the world, the King of kings, to a cruel, shameful, painful death by crucifixion! What terrible destruction we can cause when we proudly act on our private interpretations of Scripture!

Our Savior's Advice

Of course, Judas' betrayal was in itself prophesied to happen in Psalm 41:9: "Even my own familiar friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted up his heel against me." Maybe Judas recognized his part in it in the end. We do not know.

What we do know is that Jesus tells us—within the context of speaking of His betrayer—how we are to approach prophecy: "Now I tell you before it comes, that *when it does come to pass*, you may believe that I am He" (John 13:19). He repeats this two other times (14:29; 16:4) so that we understand that prophecy has its most significant impact on us *after* it is fulfilled!

God has drummed this principle since Moses' day. The sign of a true or false prophet is whether or not their predictions happen (Deuteronomy 18:21-22). The prophet Ezekiel vividly illustrates this principle. God made him do many strange things, all of which represented symbolic enactments of prophecies, many of which have yet to be fulfilled. God says of him, "Thus Ezekiel is a sign to you; according to all that he has done you shall do; and *when this comes* you shall know that I am the Lord GOD" (Ezekiel 24:24).

Dozens of times in Ezekiel, God uses the phrase, "and then they shall know that I am the LORD," or a variant of it. In every instance, it implies the individual or group understanding God's prophetic revelation *after* its

fulfillment. For example, notice Ezekiel 22:16, where God speaks to the people of Jerusalem about their sins: "You shall defile yourself in the sight of all the nations; *then* you shall know that I am the LORD."

Most, if not all, of the prophets had little or no idea how and when God would fulfill their prophecies. Daniel is a classic example. Though angels explained the prophecies to him, he still did not understand.

Although I heard, I did not understand. Then I said, "My lord, what shall be the end of these things?" And he said, "Go your way, Daniel, *for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end*" (Daniel 12:8-9).

The Value of Speculation

This verse begs the question: "Since we are living at the time of the end, should we not begin to understand these prophecies?" Yes and no. Yes, in that God gave to his true ministers an understanding of the overall picture of God's plan and how the prophecies relate. However, many of the specific details, such as the timing, exact locations, and personalities involved, have not been revealed. When we encroach into those areas, we enter the realm of speculation.

Speculation is fine and healthy—*under certain conditions*. First, we must remember Peter's rule: Prophecy is not a matter of personal opinion but of God-inspired fact. We must either accept and believe it or not. We cannot bend it to our own will or ends or for our own advantage.

Second, we must root any speculation deeply in Scripture. Herbert Armstrong said repeatedly, "Let the Bible interpret itself!" The context or companion verses usually explain the symbols, types, and timeframes. Also, speculation, usually formed from vague or unclear scriptures, must not contradict other, more reliable scriptures that clearly prove otherwise.

Third, we must do all our speculating in humility. This may be the most important rule of all. Though it is hard for us, we must be willing to say, "I

was wrong." Besides, when a prophecy comes to pass, God gets all the glory, not us. Thus, any speculating we do should be done only to glorify God and learn His mind, never for our own glory or exaltation.

All things considered, speculation is not worth very much. In many cases, it is an exercise in vanity, in futility, as it exposes how little we truly understand—or how much we cannot understand. As in the example of Judas, it can also cause great harm.

This is not to say that we should not study prophecy. We should, for it is vital to our growth. But we should study it with the mind that echoes the psalmist in Psalm 119:

Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law [teaching, instruction]. . . . Make me understand the way of Your precepts; so shall I meditate on Your wondrous works. . . . Turn away my eyes from looking at worthless things, and revive me in Your law. . . . The entirety of Your word is truth, and every one of Your righteous judgments endures forever. . . . I rejoice at Your word as one who finds great treasure. (verses 18, 27, 37, 160, 162)

When we have this attitude and see how the prophecies of God's Word validate all He is doing, our faith in Him increases. If studied correctly, prophecy helps us to grow in the hope of His Kingdom and to strive even more diligently to be worthy of it.