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# O N E

## *Prophecy 101*

GOD must have wanted His followers to learn Bible prophecy, because He dedicated almost 30 percent of His Scripture to it. Not only does prophecy teach us about future events, it also assures us that God keeps His word and His promises.

For example, the Old Testament features more than one hundred prophecies regarding the coming of the Messiah to the earth. Through these prophecies we know that Jesus was truly the Messiah, for He fulfilled every one of them. That is also how believers can be so confident that He will return physically to this earth to set up His kingdom, because He promised He would—five times more frequently than He promised to come the first time! Since His first coming is a fact of history, we can be at least five times as certain that He will come the second time.

### PROPHECY FOR NEW CONVERTS

Another reason we know that God wants Christians to study and understand prophecy is that one of the earliest New Testament books is 1 Thessalonians, a letter filled with teaching about end-time events. Every chapter contains a reference to the second coming of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul, the man God used to set the pattern for local churches throughout the world, taught the details of Bible prophecy to that new Thessalonian church during its first three weeks of existence. (We know this because he was driven out of town before his fourth Sabbath.) Yet even a casual reading of the book shows that he spoke freely about the Second Coming, the Rapture, the Antichrist, the wrath to come, and other future events. Those are the very subjects we'll be considering in this book.

### PROPHECY IS NOT SO DIFFICULT

During the past three decades there has been a dearth of prophecy teaching in both our seminaries and our churches. Many seminary professors educated in secular graduate schools were often humiliated by their humanist professors for believing “the fundamentalist approach” to Scripture. Taking the Bible literally was ridiculed, and these students were led to believe that prophecy was confusing and difficult to understand.

Consequently, when these men became seminary professors instructing the future ministers of the nation, they failed to teach the prophetic portions of the Scriptures, suggesting that prophecy is “too controversial.” Since no one can teach what they do not know, thousands of our churches today never enjoy a prophetic message or ser-

mon—not because the pastor doesn’t believe in it, but because he doesn’t know much about it.

One pastor, asked how he handled a controversial prophetic subject said, “I just don’t deal with it.”

*What?* He doesn’t deal with almost 30 percent of the Bible? Often, laypeople who buy prophetic books or attend prophecy conferences or subscribe to prophetic magazines know more about the prophetic portions of the Scriptures than do their pastors.

The pastor of one of the most prestigious churches in America, a popular author, recently invited me to coauthor a new book on prophecy with him. He explained that his publisher had approached him with the idea, in light of the renewed interest in the subject due to the rapidly approaching new millennium. My friend added, “I have never made a study of prophecy and don’t feel qualified to do so. I have read enough of your material to know we agree on the basics and think it would be good if we attempted the project together.” I encouraged him to do a study of the subject and write the book himself, for prophecy is just not that difficult.

Anyone can understand the major events of Bible prophecy if they spend a little time comparing Scripture with Scripture and if they avoid the temptation to spiritualize anything that at first seems complex. A good rule of thumb when studying any Scripture is found in the golden rule of biblical interpretation:

When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense, but take every word at its primary, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context clearly indicate otherwise.

—Dr. David L. Cooper

If you follow this rule, it is relatively easy to understand Scripture; if you ignore it, you will always be in error. That is particularly true of the prophetic sections of Scripture. In recent years a number of teachers have concluded that prophecy should usually be interpreted symbolically. Consequently, a number of conflicting teachings have brought such confusion to the church that many have given up on the subject, even though to do so they abandon an important part of God's Word.

After I have spoken on the Second Coming at a church or prophecy conference, it is not uncommon for individuals to tell me that they have not heard a single message on the Second Coming in twenty-five years. One minister wrote to say he felt convicted for never having preached a sermon on the second coming of our Lord. He said, "I have now dedicated myself to God to study and preach more prophecy." If he does, his church will come to life, his attendance will pick up, and his church will be spiritually vitalized. There is no more challenging and motivating subject in the Bible than the study of prophecy.

### THE HISTORICAL EFFECTS OF PROPHECY

Properly taught, prophecy emphasizes the "imminent" return of Christ—that He could come at any moment. This has proven to be one of the most spiritually motivating forces in church history. For whether it is the church of the first three centuries or that of the last two centuries, prophecy has had three effects on the church:

1. It has challenged believers to holy living in an unholy age;
2. It has given Christians a greater challenge to evangelize; and

3. It has caused the church to be more missionary minded as the church has realized it must fulfill the great commission before Christ returns.

### **THE FOUR PIVOTAL EVENTS OF HISTORY**

Each of the most significant events in history has marked the end of an age. Three are past; one is yet to come. All were titanic conflicts between God and Satan for the devotion of mankind; all left a significant impact on the generations that followed. The first three are Creation, the Flood, and the first coming of Christ, including His death and resurrection for the sins of mankind. The fourth and final pivotal event is the second coming of Christ to this earth.

#### **Creation**

According to the first chapter of Genesis (which means “beginnings”), the Creation highlights the origin of that very special creature, man, who is composed of not only a body and a mind but also an eternal soul. This crucial event is covered in the first three chapters of Genesis. The effects of the Fall—that is, the sin of Adam and Eve, who were created holy but used their free will to disobey God—plunged the world into sin and corruption, producing a pre-Flood population that became so wicked in only one thousand years that God destroyed them all, except for Noah and his family.

#### **The Flood**

The worldwide Flood, described in detail in Genesis 6–8, shows how God repopulated the earth from only eight people. This monumental event is mentioned in the literature of various peoples of the ancient world, providing

compelling evidence of its universality. If the scientific community recognized that fact, a spike would be driven into the heart of the theory of evolution, along with the theory of “theistic evolution” (God-guided evolution). But humanistic man would rather believe the unscientific theory of evolution than the truth of Scripture that God created man and will hold man accountable for the way he lives.

### **The Cross**

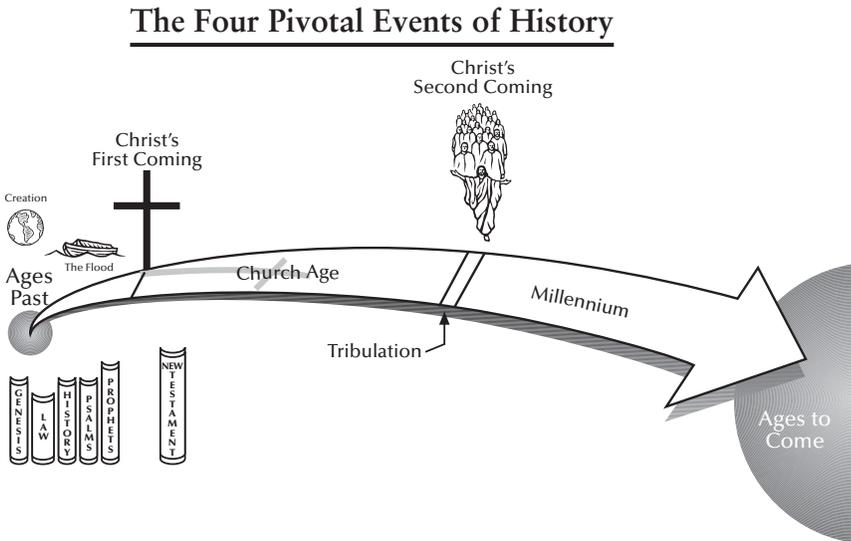
The third pivotal event of history was the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The cross as a symbol includes His virgin birth in fulfillment of prophecy, His sinless life, His sacrificial death, and His resurrection. When He as God’s only begotten Son gave Himself to die on that cross for “the sins of the whole world,” He ended the age of law and introduced the age of grace. From that time on, individuals have been able to be eternally saved “through faith” by repenting of their sins and calling on Christ to save them. That is why it is called “the age of grace.” That age will end with the next pivotal event. . . .

### **The Second Coming**

The second coming of Jesus Christ, and the many lesser events leading up to it and following it, is what prophecy is primarily about. It is doubtless the greatest story of the future to be found anywhere. No religion, no culture, and no literature offers such a sublime concept of future events that lead into an even better eternity. Once understood, these thrilling events prove so exciting and inspiring that many have turned from their sins to find Christ as their Lord and Savior—a good reason for all Christians to know

about them, particularly as we see so many of these events fulfilled in our lifetime.

There are other important events in history, but none of greater significance than these four. They are highlighted on the following chart, which also locates these pivotal events on the time line of man's pilgrimage on earth, separating the ages past from the ages to come.



For some reason known only to God, the Bible says very little about the ages past or the ages to come. God seems most interested in man's understanding of his own past—so 50 percent of the Bible's sixty-six books cover human history. It contains a wealth of historical information that has been documented by archaeologists during the last two centuries. The sixty-six books of the Bible are mostly about man's existence in the period we call "time," from Adam and Eve through the coming kingdom age of Jesus Christ.

Twenty-five percent of the Bible contains instruction on how to live in the present and how to treat others.

And 28 percent is prophecy, some of which has already been fulfilled in Israel and the first coming of Christ. The Scriptures mention briefly our entrance into His heaven for eternity and also reveal some comforting words about our future. One example is: "And thus we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:17). Another is Jesus' wonderful promise "In My Father's house are many mansions. . . . I go to prepare a place for you. . . . I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:2-3).

While the Bible merely refers to the eternal ages of the past, it provides much detail about the conflict of the ages, including Satan's rebellion, his attempt to deceive man about God, eternity, and how the world will come to a fitting climax in a one-thousand-year age of peace. It is really a beautiful story of mankind from Adam to Christ, the "second Adam" (or perfect man) who died to atone for the sins of the "first Adam."

The book you hold in your hands is primarily about God's wonderful plan for man's future events in relation to this earth prior to that age of peace. Failure to understand God's plan, from the coming of the "first Adam" to the second coming of Christ to establish His kingdom, will keep you from answering the big philosophical questions of life: *Why am I here? Where am I going? How do I get there?* Only a study of prophecy adequately answers all of these questions.

The basic time line of human history just developed will be used throughout this book to introduce the many pro-

phetic passages that fill in details of the future. It is most helpful to relate all prophetic teachings to this timeline.

### THIS PRESENT CHURCH AGE

Jesus not only promised His followers that He “will come again” and take them to His Father’s house (John 14:1-3), He promised to “build [His] church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). He built that church through the ministry of the Holy Spirit working in His apostles and in those who became believers through them. For twenty centuries His church has been persecuted by religions, kings, and dictators, yet today it is stronger than ever. That in itself is a testimony to His promise, for although the church has been the most consistently hated group on earth, it is still growing and will continue to do so until He takes it out of this world. Church growth experts estimate the current number of Christians at over *one billion* and growing.

The church age, starting with the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 through the present day, corresponds to the age of grace on the chart on the following page. Jesus described it in Matthew 13, and the apostles, particularly Peter, John, and Paul, spent the rest of their lives building and instructing that church. Revelation 2 and 3 outline it, and the New Testament, particularly the epistles, describes how its activities should be conducted.

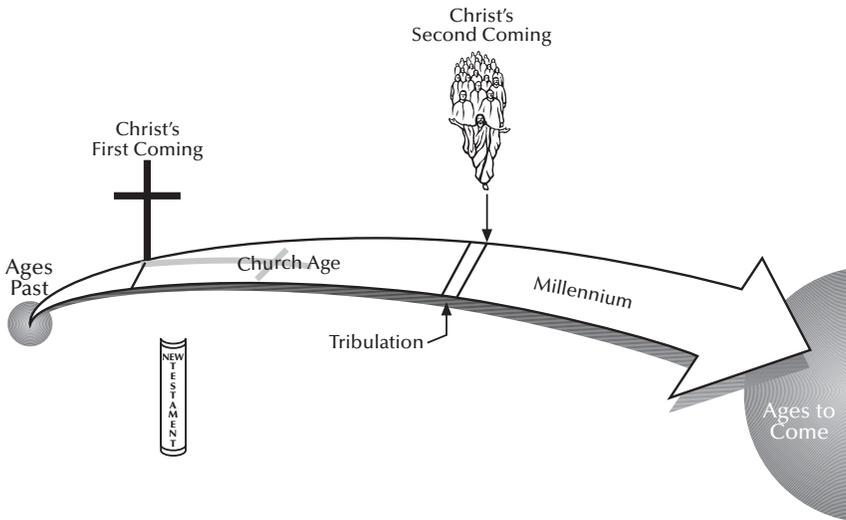
### ON THE USE OF CHARTS

An ancient Chinese proverb suggests that “a picture is worth a thousand words.” If that is true, good charts are worth a thousand words about prophecy, for they pinpoint the timing of the events described and show pro-

## ARE WE LIVING IN THE END TIMES?

phetic events in relation to each other. For many years I have used charts in churches and prophecy conferences to make difficult concepts easy to understand. Charts are a basic ingredient of my six other books on prophecy. Throughout this book we will resort to using them for clarity.

### New Testament Prophetic Events



As you look at the above chart of man's past and future sojourn on this earth, we hope you are struck with at least three significant facts.

### THE CROSS

The most famous symbol in human history marks the most significant event of all time. When Jesus Christ died on that cross for the "sins of the whole world," He reached back to Adam and Eve and forward to the last person who

will be born during the Millennium—the thousand-year reign of Christ on new Earth—to atone for their sin. He redeemed all the acts of faith on the part of those before Him and offered to all after Him, by the simple act of faith, a means of escaping the consequences of Adam’s fall into sin (and subsequently our own). This miracle of salvation was made possible because of who He was, the sinless Son of God. The Crucifixion was not merely a man dying for the sins of man, but “the only begotten Son of God” dying for the sins of mankind.

### **All humankind has a choice to make**

Every person in every generation has a choice: to obey God or to do his own thing. In Old Testament days obedient faith required men and women to sacrifice an innocent lamb in obedience to the instruction of God. Since the finished work of Christ on the cross, that act of faith is the bending of one’s knees before the cross and calling on the name of the Lord. In this sense, each individual determines where he will spend eternity—with God or without Him. Those are the only two choices.

### **You have a choice to make**

Search your own heart to see if you have made such a decision. Have you personally called on the name of the Lord? If not, we urge you to pause from your reading and do so now. In case you would like some help in the wording of your prayer, we suggest the following:

Dear Heavenly Father, I confess that I have sinned against heaven and in your sight and need forgiveness. Thank you for sending your Son Jesus to die

ARE WE LIVING IN THE END TIMES?

on the cross for my sins, according to the Scriptures,  
and I thank you for raising Him from the dead.  
Today I ask Him to come into my heart to cleanse  
me from my sin and become my Lord and Savior.  
I give myself to you. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen!