

HOW TO STUDY LESSON

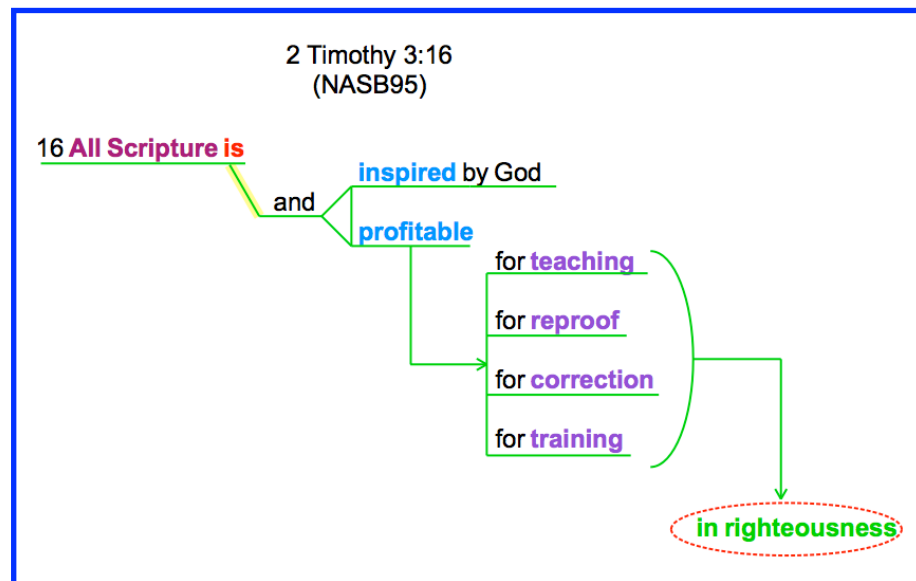
How to Study Prophecy

Lesson #7

Teacher's Tip

“In reading the Scripture, do as Luther advised. He says, “When I get a promise, I treat it as if it were a tree in my garden. I know there is rich fruit on it; and if I cannot at once get it, I shake the tree backwards and forwards by prayer and meditation, until at last the fruit drops into my hand.” Do you the same. Read a short portion of Scripture; turn it over and over again in your meditation all day long; and then, if you cannot get anything out of it, I will tell you a way whereby you will be sure to get something. Go down on your knees before the passage, and say, “O Lord, open this passage to me; give me something out of it; teach me to understand it;” and you will not be long before God refreshes you with dainty portions from the tables of paradise, and makes your soul glad with choice morsels of royal dainties, wherewith he feeds his own chosen ones.”¹

Outlining II Tim. 3:16



TEACHING OUTLINE:

Title: “THE REASON YOU HAVE A BIBLE”

- I. YOUR BIBLE IS INSPIRED
- II. YOUR BIBLE IS PROFITABLE
 - A. For teaching
 - B. For Reproof
 - C. For Correction
 - D. For Training In Righteousness

¹ Charles Spurgeon, *Covenant Blessings*, Spurgeon's Sermons, vol. 46, #2681.

The way prophecy should be studied has been debated by many. It is beyond this study to cover the various views. Two key concepts must be grasped in studying prophecy. First, we must apply all the normal Bible study principles learned so far to the study of prophecy and not adopt another method. Second, we must realize that the main debate among scholars is how much of prophecy is literal and how much is figurative or metaphorical. All would agree that there are both figurative and literal texts in prophecy but the area of disagreement is how much is figurative. In this lesson we will seek to gain a basic understanding of how to study and interpret prophetic portions of the Bible.

I. IMPORTANT PROPHETIC LITERARY DEVICES AND TERMS

- A. **Eschatology:** If you study prophecy you will come across this term. It refers to the doctrine or study of last things.
- B. **Types:** A type is an Old Testament person, place, or thing that has literal historical meaning but which is a model, prototype, or pattern of a greater future reality. They pre-figure Christ or His redemptive work. Melchizedek (**Gen. 14:18**) was a type of Christ (**Heb. 7**), the bronze serpent (**Numb. 21:9**) pre-figured the work of Christ on the cross (**John 3:14**), and much of the Old Testament sacrificial system represented Christ and His work (**see Heb. 9, esp. vs. 8**).
- C. **Simile:** A simile is an expressed comparison and uses the words "like" and "as" to indicate a comparison is being made. **Rev. 1:13-16** *"and in the middle of the lampstands one **like** a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His breast with a golden girdle. And His head and His hair were white **like** white wool, **like** snow; and His eyes were **like** a flame of fire; and His feet were **like** burnished bronze, when it has been caused to glow in a furnace, and His voice was **like** the sound of many waters. And in His right hand He held seven stars; and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was **like** the sun shining in its strength."*
- D. **Metaphor:** A metaphor is an unexpressed comparison and does not use the words "like" or "as." Jesus said, *"I am the door," "I am the bread of life," "You are the light of the world."* It is obvious that Jesus did not intend these phrases to be taken literally. What He was doing is making a comparison between familiar things e.g., door, bread, light, with not so familiar things. Jesus is in some respects like a door, like sustaining bread, we are like lights.
- E. **Allegory:** An allegory is an extended metaphor. Unlike a parable, it does not have to be true to life and virtually every part of an allegory has secondary meaning, spiritual meaning. The allegorical vision of the tree in **Dan 4:11-27**, the allegorical usage of Sarah and Hagar in **Gal. 4:21-5:1**, or the beast in **Rev. 13:1-8; 17:7-18**, are examples of allegory. Usually allegory is interpreted in the context.
- F. **Figurative and Symbolic:** Words can be used in three different ways i.e., literal, figurative, and symbolic.

1. *Figurative* use of words is very vast with over *two hundred types* being found in the Scriptures. Both figurative and symbolic language uses the literal meaning of words to communicate a secondary meaning.
2. A *symbol* is similar to a type (see above) but:
 - a. Does not need to have Old Testament roots.
 - b. Does not need to have a historical reality.
 - c. Does not need to point to a future reality.
 - d. Does not need to refer to Christ or His work.
 - e. Is a timeless comparison of physical objects, which represent spiritual realities.
 - f. As an example notice how the word “*sun*” is used below.
 - (1) Mark 1:32 'And when evening had come, after **the sun had set**. . ." (Literal usage)
 - (2) Rev. 7:16 "They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; neither shall the **sun beat down** on them, nor any heat; (Figurative usage)
 - (3) Rev. 12:1 "A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman **clothed with the sun**. . ." (Symbolic usage)

G. **Multiple Fulfillment/Sense Passages:** These are rare passages that have both near and far fulfillment. The “*single meaning of the text*” would include both stages of fulfillment. Example:

II Sam. 7:13-14 "*He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me; when he commits iniquity, I will correct him with the rod of men and the strokes of the sons of men.*"

1. *Near fulfillment:* This passage speaks of Solomon who:
 - a. Is a literal son of David.
 - b. Built God a house or temple.
 - c. Committed iniquity.
 - d. Was corrected with the rod of men (figuratively speaking).
2. *Far fulfillment:* This passage speaks of Jesus who:
 - a. Is a descendent of David.
 - b. Will build a house for God.
 - c. Has a throne and a kingdom which will be established forever.
 - d. Was literally the Son of God and God was literally His father.

- H. **Apocalyptic Literature:** Is a term that generally describes portions of prophecy which contain many symbols and figures. Different definitions can be found. Some of the characteristics of apocalyptic texts are:
1. A focus on God intervening into time and space to judge wickedness on earth and bring in everlasting righteousness.
 2. Usually is in the form of visions and dreams.
 3. Images are usually not true to life but allegorical and symbolic.
- I. **Premillennialism** is one of the three major systems of understanding end time events. It sees most of the New Testament prophecy as still needing to be fulfilled. Premillennialists interpret prophecy in a more literal fashion. Some distinctions of premillennialism are:
1. A unique salvation future for the ethnic nation Israel.
 2. There has always existed a literal kingdom of God, a spiritual rule of God and there will be a literal earthly rule of Christ.
 3. We are in the church age when the kingdom is primarily being offered to Gentiles through the gospel of Jesus Christ.
 4. At the end of the church age the saints, both dead and alive, will be caught up in the air to be forever with the Lord (the rapture).
 5. After the rapture a seven year period of tribulation will ensue when God will focus His attention on the nation of Israel, bringing many Jews to faith in their previously rejected Messiah, Jesus Christ.
 6. The tribulation period will close when Christ literally returns to earth, separating the Sheep from the Goats, binding Satan, and setting up His literal earthly kingdom which will last a literal 1000 years.
 7. During Christ's thousand year reign on earth the raptured saints will rule and reign with Him, the curse will be partially lifted, and men will live extended lives like before the flood.
 8. At the end of the thousand years Satan will be loosed, deceiving the nations, bringing God's final judgment on him and the wicked on earth.
 9. The earth and heavens will be recreated ushering in the eternal state.
 10. Christ's coming for His church is imminent or could happen any time.
- J. **Postmillennialism** is a system of prophecy which takes a more figurative approach to interpreting prophecy and believes most of the New Testament prophecy has already been fulfilled. Some of the distinctives of postmillennialism are:
1. That Christ began His kingdom reign in AD 70 after Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans.
 2. That the tribulation immediately preceded and culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.
 3. That Satan is presently bound and unable to deceive the nations.

4. That believers will turn the world around for Christ through aggressive evangelism, education, and infiltration into all forms of government, media, and society.
5. The majority, but not all people, will be saved immediately preceding Christ's return.
6. The 1000 year reign of Christ is an expression to describe an unspecified time of widespread victory on earth through the Church's efforts to preach the gospel and take over the world for Christ, which will bring about a utopian type state of world-wide Christian dominance.
7. After the Church's victory, Christ will come to receive the kingdom the church has brought about, judge the living and the dead, the rapture will occur, and the eternal state will ensue.
8. There is no special future for the ethnic nation of Israel as the Church has taken the place of Israel and the prophecies to Israel are either nullified or spiritually enjoyed by the Church.
9. Christ cannot come back at any time (rejection of imminence).

K. **Amillennialism** is a system of prophecy which also interprets prophecy in a more figurative way. Some of the distinctives of Amillennialism are:

1. Christ's kingdom is spiritual and extends from His resurrection until the final judgment at the end of the age.
2. The Bema judgment, the Sheep & Goats judgment, the Great White Throne judgment, and the rapture all happen at the end of the age when Christ returns.
3. The 1000 years of Revelation ch. 20 is not a literal 1000 years but represents the undefined length of time between Christ's resurrection and return.
4. Christ is now reigning in heaven and on earth through the lives of believers.
5. Satan is bound and has been bound since Jesus' resurrection and is not deceiving the "nations" any longer because of the preaching of the gospel.
6. Satan will be released at the end of the age, right before Jesus' appearing, to deceive the nations again.
7. After the second coming the eternal state will ensue.
8. There is no special future for Israel as a nation.
9. The church has taken the place of Israel and the prophecies to Israel are either nullified or spiritually enjoyed by the Church.
10. Christ can come back any moment to set up the eternal state.

II. GUIDELINES FOR STUDYING PROPHECY

A. **Take a literal interpretation of your passage unless there is a specific reason not to do so in the context.** Remember the saying, *"If the literal meaning makes sense, seek no other sense."*

- B. **Remember that some prophets were unable to explain in words what they saw in visions.** They did their best to relay what they saw but often could not explain details in words that meet our curiosities.

- C. **Focus on the main purpose of the prophecy.** Ask yourself, "What is the main purpose of this prophecy?" Look for the big idea first before the details. Some of the common reasons for prophecy are:
 - 1. To encourage us about the future hope we have in Christ.
 - 2. To give us hope to persevere in trials.
 - 3. To motivate us to live godly lives in the face of Jesus' sudden return.

- D. **Don't neglect prophecy.** Some would never even think about preaching or teaching prophetic texts for fear it will be too hard. This is not good because:
 - 1. We are to teach the whole counsel of God's Word (Acts 20:26-27).
 - 2. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable (II Tim. 3:15-17).
 - 3. The book of Revelation is the only book in the Bible, which promises a blessing at the beginning and the end for those who read it (Rev. 1:3; 22:7).

- E. **Don't try to force your theological system on prophetic passages.** Let them speak for themselves. Do exegesis (read out of the text) not eisegesis (read into the text) when you study prophecy. Many have come up with bizarre fanciful interpretations by reading things into the text which the author could not have had in mind.

III. HOMEWORK

- A. One day you are looking at some prophecy books at a Christian book sellers convention. You happen to pick up a book on the thousand year reign of Christ.
 - 1. A person standing to your right says, "I don't believe in a literal thousand year reign of Christ. I think we are already in Christ's kingdom and that the thousand years mentioned in Revelation 20 is figurative. I think Christ is ruling and reigning now through His church."
 - 2. Then the person on your left says, "I kind of agree with him, but I think that the thousand years is figurative of a future time on earth when Christians finally take over the world with the gospel. I believe as we evangelize the world, restore the Old Testament civil law, then we will be in the kingdom. The thousand years of Revelation 20 isn't literal. It is merely a figurative expression to describe a long time."

3. You respond to these two men by saying, "I believe the thousand year reign of Christ on earth is a literal thousand year reign of Christ on earth." Both encourage you to study a little harder assured that you will come up with their view. They both agree that if you study Rev. 20 a little closer you will be convinced that the thousand years mentioned there isn't literal.
- B. Your assignment, whether you choose to accept it or not, is to study a little harder and try to determine whether the "thousand years" mentioned in Revelation 20:1-7 is a literal thousand years or figurative of something else. Remember to use your vast Bible study knowledge gained so far. Do exegesis and not eisegesis. Below are some questions which will help in your study but feel free to go beyond the questions below.
1. How many times is the word "thousand" repeated in **Rev. 20:1-7**?
 2. How many times does:
 - a. "a thousand" appear?
 - b. "the thousand" appear?
 - c. What is the difference between the two and why does it matter?
 3. What would be the purpose of using "thousand" over and over again if it doesn't mean a thousand?
 4. Read **Rev. 20:1-10**. Would you say the language being used is vague, nebulous and general or specific, exact, and detailed?
 5. How is Satan described in **Rev. 20:1-3**?
 - a. Who binds Satan?
 - b. Where is Satan cast?
 - c. Is John referring to a "literal chain"?
 - d. How can a Spiritual being be bound with a chain?
 - e. What happens to the place where Satan is bound?
 - f. What is the effect of Satan being bound?

- g. If Christ is ruling now in His kingdom, is Satan bound and unable to deceive the nations? (See **Acts 5:3; 10:38; 26:18; Rom. 16:20; I Cor. 5:5; 7:5; II Cor. 2:11; Eph. 4:27; 6:11; I Thess. 2:18; I Tim. 1:20; 5:15; II Tim. 2:26; James 4:7; I Pet. 5:8; I Jn. 3:8, 10; Rev. 2:9, 10, 13, 24; 3:9**).
6. **Look at Rev. 20:4.**
- a. What furniture items did John see in **vs. 4**? Were these literal?
- b. Who sat on these pieces of furniture **vs. 4**? Were these people literal?
- c. How did those people die? Is this literal (**see Rev. 6:9; 18:24; 19:2**)?
- d. At the end of the thousand years, what happens to these people and what do they do? Is this literal?
7. **Look at Rev. 20:1-10.** Are there any general references to numbers of things used in this text (not including the word “thousand”)?
8. Does John use general references in any other part of the book (see **Rev. 1:15; 5:11; 7:9; 9:9; 10:11; 14:2; 17:1; 19:6, 12**)?
9. If John frequently used general references to describe large unspecified numbers of things, and if they occur all throughout the book, why does he use a specific number six times in **Rev. 20:1-7** to describe the duration of the reign of Christ?
10. Look at the use of specific numbers in the book of Revelation. See if they are used to literally number things or if they are only general approximations of the numbers of things.
- a. In Rev. 1:4 were seven churches being addressed?
- b. In Rev. 6:1 do the seven seals represent seven things?
- c. In Rev. 8:2 do seven trumpets represent seven things?

- d. In Rev. 15:7 do the seven bowls represent seven things?
 - e. In Rev. 7:4-8 does $12,000 \times 12 = 144,000$ things?
 - f. In Rev. 8:13 are there actually three angels connected with the last three woes?
 - g. In Rev. 16:13 are there literally three unclean spirits?
 - h. In Rev. 21:12-14 are there literally twelve apostles?
 - i. In any of these uses does a specific number not denote a specific number of things?
11. If the book of Revelation usually uses specific numbers to denote actual numbers of things, why not take the word “thousand” literally?
12. Some have argued that the “thousand years” is figurative because of cross references and the way “thousand” is used in other places in the Bible. Look up the cross references below and consider how you might answer this objection.
- a. **Psa. 50:10** “For every beast of the forest is Mine, The cattle on a thousand hills.”
 - b. **Psa. 90:4** For a thousand years in Your sight Are like yesterday when it passes by, Or as a watch in the night.
 - c. **II Pet. 3:8** But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day.
 - d. Are the verses above conclusive that all uses of “thousand” should be taken figuratively?
 - e. If a specific book of the Bible is being studied and it uses numbers literally and yet there are a few references in other books of the Bible written by different authors that use numbers figuratively, how should we interpret numbers in the book being studied and why?
13. Now that you have studied harder what is your interpretation of the six references to a “*thousand years*” in **Rev. 20**?
14. Read and meditate on **Jer. 9:23-24**. Write a study title and outline from these verses.