

# God's PATHWAY Through PROPHECY

## Major Issues Within Bible Prophecy

**INTRODUCTION:** Most students of Bible prophecy tend to start wrong, and the result is that they end wrong. Starting right is imperative and requires that we address and answer at least three foundational matters relative to the study of Bible prophecy before we delve into the details of prophecy. These essential issues are set forth in the following questions: 1) How does one approach and interpret prophetic portions of Scripture? What is the pre-thought behind the interpretive method and how does it result in how one understands texts and terms within the Word of God? 2) What is the Millennium and what are the major perspectives of the Millennial Kingdom? 3) What is the Tribulation and what are the major views of the Tribulation as it relates to the doctrine of the Church and the Rapture? Each point needs to be addressed in order to lay the foundation for our journey along God's pathway through prophecy. By doing so we will know exactly where the journey commences, how the journey will be conducted, and the course that leads the journey to its sound, sober, and safe biblical conclusion.

### I. HOW IS BIBLICAL PROPHECY INTERPRETED? – 4 Views

**NOTE:** Throughout Church History at least four interpretive approaches have been taken with reference to the book of Revelation and other prophetic portions of the Word of God. Each of these methods is driven by evident systems of pre-thought which influences how students seek to interpret the prophetic Scriptures. Each respective approach defines and determines the course that is traveled, and the conclusions that are taught. Thus, where one starts, defines and determines where one ends on the pathway through prophecy. The four (4) major interpretive systems are:

A. The **FICTIONAL** Approach to Bible Prophecy – This is the view of the Naturalistic skeptic and agnostic who interestingly enough are prophetically predicted and previewed by the apostle Peter when he warns, “*Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts*” (2 Pet. 3:3). Proponents of this school of thought view the Bible as a purely natural religious document resulting from the religious experiences, emotions, and expressions of the early church, rather than a supernatural revelation from God. In other words, the Bible, together with the supposed prophecies of the Bible, are the product of man, not God. It rejects notions of Supernatural Revelation and Futuristic Prophecy because it rejects any and all notions of the supernatural from the outset. Due to its denial of every idea or concept of supernaturalism and predictive prophecy, it limits all truth claims to the realms of hypothecated scientific naturalism and human rationalism. The Bible could not possibly address things outside the lengths and limits of man's capacity to rationally understand on his own merit as man. For this reason, all prophetic passages must be interpreted in the light of mankind's limited reasonings.

B. The **ALLEGORICAL** Approach to Bible Prophecy – This school of thought views and interprets Bible prophecy in a non-literal, purely symbolic, and often mystical sense. Daniel, Revelation, and other apocalyptic texts amount to highly symbolic accounts of the age-long progressive struggle between the forces of good and evil. This approach dates back to the allegorical schools of Alexandria Egypt which were adept at finding non-literal, mystical meanings hidden within Scriptural symbolism. In many respects, advocates of this position interpret biblical prophecy within a dualistic notion of a fatalistic cosmic conflict between good forces and evil forces and the experiences of Jews and Christians as they live out their faith within the context of this cosmic conflict. In more modern times liberal Liberation Theology has applied this interpretive scheme to the conflict and struggles for Black Liberation, Women’s Liberation, and even the moral battles for the liberation of Sodomites and other sexual deviants. From an interpretive perspective, the terms of prophetic texts take a backseat to the concepts that these terms are theorized to support. This reduces the study of Bible prophecy to an investigation and interpretation of humanly devised speculations over and above the actual words of the Biblical record. The words of the text are not to be taken literally, because according to this view, they were never intended to convey literal truth, but symbolic experiences within the struggle of life between the forces of good and evil. Generally speaking, this is the position of Liberalism, Neo-Orthodoxy, and Liberation Theology.

C. The **HISTORICAL** Approach to Bible Prophecy – (Two types of Prophetic History)

1. **PAST** History – Known as the “Preterist Theory.” Preterism comes from a Latin word meaning “past.” Preterists see prophecy as having already been fulfilled during the early centuries of the Church. Consequently, the whole of biblical prophecy is to be understood from an already, past perspective. A perfect example of this would be the Preterist’ approach to the book of Revelation. Regarding Revelation, the Preterists commonly interpret chapters 5-11 as referring to the Church’s past victory over Judaism; chapters 12-19 denote the Church’s triumph over Romanism; while chapters 20-22 speak of the Church’s glory resulting from these victories. Adherents of this camp typically view the punishments of the book as bespeaking those experienced by the early Church during the imperial persecutions of the first century, especially those under Nero and Domitian. The entire book of Revelation is understood as having been fulfilled by the time of Constantine (A.D. 312), when the visible Church is historically thought to have achieved victory over the world. A basic premise of this approach is a concept known as “Replacement Theology.” This theological theory proposes that the Church has replaced Israel as the object of God’s prophetic program. Thus, the book of Revelation must be strictly interpreted in light of the Church, without regard to Jewish connotations.
2. **Progressive** History – A view popularized by Joachim of Flora, a Roman Catholic scholar whose followers became known as Joachimites. He divided biblical

prophecy into three progressive and mystical stages of history. Today progressivists understand the book of Revelation from a “Panoramic Perspective” of Church History extending from John’s day to the end of the age. From this point of view biblical prophecy is seen as being in the process of being fulfilled throughout the whole developmental history of the Christian era. This means that the book of Revelation has been, is being, and will be fulfilled through the historical events and experiences of Christians. Many from this camp find the mystical key that supposedly unlocks the door of this interpretive scheme in the names of the seven churches of Asia Minor in Revelation 2-3. Each name supposedly bears the force and flow of a specific era in the Church’s history. Through these seven names the entire fulfillment of Church history can be traced from the first century, to the final century. In addition, the symbolic terms of the Revelation are not to be seen as having a literal-historical meaning from a futuristic perspective. Instead, the many symbols convey conceptual concepts from history and the progressive periods within Church history. Accordingly, many of the symbols are understood to speak of the rise of the Papacy, the corruption of the visible Church, and the various conflicts throughout the Church age between the true Church and the counterfeit church. A key point to note in this view, is that it understands the book of Revelation and the dominant features related to the prophetic period known as Daniel’s 70<sup>th</sup> Week as centered on the Christian Church rather than the nation of Israel. This is in large part due to a strong replacement theology mindset, in which the New Testament Church replaced National Israel as the object of God’s eschatological dealings. It is incumbent, therefore, on the part of those who hold this view to be able to find a sound and sober biblical basis for assigning Daniel’s 70<sup>th</sup> Week to non-Jewish Christians. This was the common view of many of the Reformers. Other Reformers avoided the issue by giving little to no attention to the book of Revelation. Their primary focus, given the conflicts of the hour, was to deal with matters of soteriology (i.e. the study of salvation) rather than eschatology (i.e. the study of last things).

#### D. The PROPHETICAL/FUTURISTIC Approach to Bible Prophecy –

Futurists hold that the book of Revelation actually addresses things past, present, and prophetic. This is based upon their understanding of the internal testimony found in Revelation 1:19. With regards to the prophetic, the Revelation speaks of things yet future from chapters 5-22. This view might also be called the “Literalist” or “Plain Sense” approach, in as much as it attempts to consistently interpret the prophetic Scriptures in a normal or plain sense manner, unless otherwise dictated by clear textual markers. This remains true even in relation to the many symbols and metaphors within apocalyptic literature. Prophetic symbols and metaphors are understood to employ real terms that communicate real thoughts and real truths through symbolic and illustrative typology, not mere conjectures or concepts to be hypothesized by human speculation. These symbolized truths are interpreted and understood only by allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture, as well as allowing

biblically cited history to inform future things by drawing from the internal historical records sovereignly included in, and identified by the inspired and inscripturated record of sacred writ. The key is Canonical Exegesis wherein Scripture informs Scripture at all times. Accordingly, it is imperative to understand the Revelation in light of the book of Daniel, and other Old Testament texts. It treats prophecy in a futuristic reference and seeks to always permit Scripture to interpret Scripture so as to avoid unnecessary speculation and sensationalism. Its basic operating tenet is when the plain sense of the text makes plain sense, there is no sense in seeking any other sense. The way in which the “plain sense” is determined, is to discover what comparative Scriptural analysis dictates through exegesis, without the need to go outside of Scriptural data to engage in eisegesis.

## II. WHAT IS THE MILLENNIUM AND THE MILLENNIAL KINGDOM? – 3 Views.

### A. The **Meaning** of Millennialism

The terms “millennium” and “millennialism” derive from the Latin numeral (*mille*), meaning “a thousand.” Biblically speaking the eschatological concept of “one thousand” comes from Revelation 20:2-7 where the King James Version of the English Bible reads as follows:

*“And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years, And cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal upon him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years should be fulfilled: and after that he must be loosed a little season. And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. But the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years. And when the thousand years are expired, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison.”*

Note that the phrase “thousand years” occurs six times in the space of six verses. All references speak of the same subject, the one-thousand-year reign of Jesus the Messiah. In the Latin Vulgate the English phrase “one thousand” is rendered by (*annos mille*) “one thousand years.” The Latin corresponds with the Greek phrase (*chilia etē*), also translated “one thousand years” (Rev. 20:2-7). Chiliasm or Millennialism are synonymous terms that denote synonymous theological categories addressing the Biblical concept of Christ’s one-thousand-year Kingdom. Both terms refer to a theological concept stressing that Christ shall exercise and enjoy a one-

thousand-year Messianic Reign during which Jesus rules as King of kings and Lord of lords. As the true Second Adam, this earthly Kingdom fulfills God's eternal plan to govern planet earth through His anointed and appointed male-Son Vicegerent. While all serious Bible scholars and prophecy students acknowledge that Scripture speaks of a Millennial Kingdom, various schools have vastly different models of this Kingdom as it relates to the actual nature, time, location, and catalyst of the Kingdom. These differing theological models directly impact the way opposing schools interpret prophetic passages pertaining to the Kingdom.

## B. The MODELS of Millennialism

1. **Postmillennialism** – Probably the most popular view at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The phrase – postmillennial – is a compound term from the prefix (post – after, following) plus the root, millennium (thousand-year kingdom) and means that Jesus will return AFTER the Kingdom Age. Christ second Advent does not cause the Kingdom to come, instead, it is the climax to the Kingdom that has already come. Consequently, Jesus' second advent is not followed by the Kingdom, but by the Eternal Estate of the New Heavens and the New Earth. This view claims to believe in a literal earthly kingdom ruled over by Jesus from his seat in heaven via the law of the Gospel. The kingdom is an “ALREADY-BUT-NOT-YET” process now being realized in and through the Triumphant Church on earth. The central component of this theory is this, the Church, which is itself the Kingdom, will be triumphant and will overcome the world-system in a real, historical, literal manner BEFORE Jesus returns. The Church represents both the actual Kingdom of Christ, and the agency by which the Kingdom will ultimately be brought about through the Gospelizing and Christianizing of the global society. Christ currently rules over His earthly kingdom from His throne in heaven and will visibly return at the final conclusion of the Kingdom age. Jesus' return does not commence the kingdom, it concludes the kingdom. His advent is Postmillennial. Operating on the basis of “Replacement Theology” Postmillennialists view the Church as the new Spiritual Israel, having replaced National Israel as the heirs to the promises of God in the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants. Christ's return will be followed by the eternal state. Prominent proponents of this school were Jonathan Edwards, A. H. Strong, and A. A. Hodge.
2. **Amillennialism** – Formed by prefixing the word millennial with the Greek negative preformative (*a* – alpha privative), meaning “no millennium”. This model views the kingdom as a non-literal, non-earthly, purely spiritual and heavenly reality. There is no literal or future EARTHLY kingdom of Christ. The kingdom is an ALREADY-PRESENT reality occurring within the Church in heaven and the Church on earth. Based upon another form of “Replacement Theology” the Church was Israel in the Old Testament and the Church is now Israel in the New Testament. All of God's people from all dispensations of time comprise the Church. More importantly, in this school of thought the Church IS the Kingdom of

Christ. This point cannot be overstated. The invisible, mystical, universal Church equals the invisible, mystical, universal Kingdom. As such, she has inherited all of God's promises to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David because National Israel forever forfeited these blessings and has been finally and fully cast off. There will be no national or spiritual restoration for Israel. Christ now rules over His spiritual kingdom from heaven and will return at His second advent to usher in the eternal state of the New Heavens and the New Earth. This school tends to employ a more allegorical method of interpreting Bible prophecy. A leading promoter of this camp is William Hendrickson.

3. **Premillennialism** – Generally speaking this school is historically defined by its firm adherence to, and application of a literal, earthly, future Kingdom Age which shall be sovereignly and supernaturally ushered in by the visible and bodily return of Christ to this earth. Jesus' Second Advent occurs BEFORE the kingdom so that the latter is PRE-millennial. It is the future, literal, bodily, and visible return of Jesus alone that serves as the catalyst and commencement of the Kingdom Age. The Kingdom will come in its full and final earthly expression, only once the King Himself has returned to Earth as God's true Vicegerent. This view strongly rejects any form of "Replacement Theology" by recognizing and respecting a clear and purposeful distinction between Israel and the Church. Adherents differ as to the extent with which God's dealings distinguish between the two. It maintains that God's callings and promises are without repentance so that His covenants with Abraham and David are to be literally fulfilled in Israel during a yet future Kingdom period when National Israel shall be revived and spiritually restored to her long-awaited Messiah, Jesus Christ the Son of David. This school employs a literal futuristic hermeneutic in interpreting prophetic Scriptures. In this literal interpretive approach, symbols and metaphors are fully acknowledged and analyzed within the Canonical context of Scripture, so as to allow Scripture to interpret Scripture. The goal is to arrive at the plain sense of the sacred text. It should be noted that within the premillennial camp three prominent positions have emerged and assumed dominance from an interpretive perspective.
  - a. **Historic** Premillennialism – Originated in modern times with David Nevins Lord, editor of "*The Theological and Literary Review*" (1848-1861). Proponents generally interpret Revelation 6-18 in a historical sense already fulfilled during the Church's history. This position has lost favor among most premillennialists during recent times.
  - b. **Futuristic** Premillennialism – Revived in modern times by Edward Irving, organizer of the Albury Park Prophecy Conferences. His views found great support and promotion among the Plymouth Brethren. Advocates of this view interpret the book of Revelation as literal futuristic and apocalyptic prophecy yet to be fulfilled in a final seven-year period known as Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> Week. Historically proponents of the strict futuristic perspective are generally

normative dispensationalists who divide redemptive history and God's unfolding drama into eight theological dispensations – Innocence, Conscience, Human Government, Promise, Law, Gospel, Kingdom, Eternal Estate. Proponents have no room for any concept of a present phase or form of the Kingdom. The Kingdom is purely futuristic and will take place only during that full and final age in which Jesus reigns upon planet earth as the true King of David. To this very hour the Kingdom is strictly a NOT YET reality, with no progressive form or function in the ALREADY!

- c. **Progressive** Premillennialism – Like the Futuristic camp, proponents of this view see the book of Revelation through a futuristic perspective, and firmly hold to a literal future Kingdom on earth. However, while the Kingdom does have a full and final future expression on earth; it also has a present and progressive expression within the hearts of God's elect. Thus, the Kingdom of Christ is both an ALREADY-BUT-NOT-YET reality. In its present form the Kingdom is a spiritual reality within the hearts of God's people, resulting from the fact that the King Himself resides within each and every Christian. In its proleptic or prophetic form the Kingdom is going to be a literal, historical, visible, earthly reality ushered in by the return of Jesus Christ to this earth. At Christ's return He shall bring full and final fulfillment to the Abrahamic and Davidic Covenants as they relate to Jews and Gentiles alike. He shall do so by literally sitting upon the literal throne of David, in the literal city of David, as the literal King of David, over the literal house of David, for a literal one thousand years. Then and only then will the Eternal Estate take place within a New Heaven and a New Earth.

It is important to keep in mind that within the Pre-Millennial camp the Church and the Kingdom are two separate works and expressions of the Lordship of Jesus Christ on earth. The Church is the Body, Bride, and Building of Christ; but it is not the Kingdom of Christ. The Church does indeed participate in the Kingdom both in the present and in the prophetic. In the present the Church participates in the Kingdom by virtue of the fact that the King indwells each and every believer that makes up the Church. Thus, the King is in the Church; but the Church is not yet fully in the Kingdom. For Progressivists the Church is in the ALRERADY aspect of the Kingdom, but not in the NOT-YET aspect of the Kingdom. Currently, Christians live in the spiritual form of the kingdom in a non-glorified state of limited participation because they have not yet been resurrected and glorified. In the prophetic phase the Church will participate in the Kingdom in a glorified condition as resurrected saints who shall share in the New Covenant promises and blessings of Israel in the full and final conditions of Christ's Messianic rule on earth.

### III. WHAT IS THE TRIBULATON AND TRIBULATIONISM? – 3 Views

## A. The **MEANING** of Tribulation!

It must be clearly stated that the Bible distinguishes between general historical periods of tribulation which have occurred on multiple occasions throughout Judeo-Christian history, and the yet future and specific period known as “The Tribulation!” Biblically and theologically speaking “The Tribulation” is generally understood as referring to a yet future and final seven-year period of apocalyptic global persecution and wrath which shall come upon God’s people such as the world has never known. Some understand the Tribulation as corresponding to the entire final seven-year period known as Daniel’s 70<sup>th</sup> Week, so that the Tribulation itself lasts for a full seven years. Others view the Tribulation as comprising only a portion of the final seven-year period so that the Tribulation itself will last for a period of time within the overall final 70<sup>th</sup> Week of Daniel.

A key tenet of the differing tribulational theories, which serves to define them and distinguish them, is the event known as the Rapture. Within every system, the Rapture refers to that yet future event whereby the Lord Himself shall sovereignly and supernaturally catch up His own elect people so as to remove them from the earth and rescue them from the impending devastation of the future Divine of wrath of God which shall be poured out during a period known as the Day of the Lord. The timing of the Rapture event is the distinguishing feature of each specific tribulation theory. Theologically speaking three of the most prominent views of the Tribulation which have developed in direct relation to the Rapture are as follows.

## B. The **MODELS** of Tribulation!

C. **Post-Tribulationism** – The oldest and most dominant of all such views. It is that theological position which anticipates that the Church will be present on earth for the entire Tribulation Period. The rapture takes place at the close of this seven-year period when Jesus returns in power and great glory. It sees Christ’s Second Advent and the Rapture as one single event. This view correlates the Tribulation with the final seven years of Daniel’s 70<sup>th</sup> Week and draws little to no distinction between Israel and the Church. Proponents of this position tend to divorce the Day of the Lord from the seven-year Tribulation period, so that the Day of the Lord comes at the very end of that seven-year time. Both Amillenarians and Premillenarians have and do hold to this system.

D. **Mid-Tribulationism** – This serves as the prominent mediating position of the various schools. A more recent concept, this theory proposes that the Rapture occurs at the mid-point of the final seven-year period, because advocates see this as the time in which the Day of the Lord actually starts. Thus, the Day of the Lord is differentiated from the 70<sup>th</sup> Week of Daniel. The Rapture itself divides the two periods of Tribulation and the Great Tribulation. The Church will endure the first 3 ½ years of Tribulation but she will escape the final 3 ½ years of Great Tribulation. Like the Post-

Trib. theory, Mid-tribulationists view the Tribulation as constituting the entire seven-year period of Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> Week. However, the last 3 ½ years are exclusively the Divine Wrath of God from which all Christians are promised special exemption. Because the final half of the final Week constitutes the Divine wrath of God explains why the Rapture must be understood to take place prior to the beginning of the last three and a half years of Tribulation.

E. **Pre-Tribulationism** – A “Rapture Theory” generally held only by Pre-millenarians, particularly, Dispensational and Progressive Pre-millenarians. This view is relatively new in the history of the Church, having risen to prominence with the teachings of John Nelson Darby in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. It was popularized through the huge success of the now famous Scofield Reference Bible. While many seek to assign this view to the patristic fathers of the early Church, the evidence for this is hard pressed. A fundamental feature of the Pre-Trib view is the belief that the Rapture is entirely distinct from the Second Advent of Christ. The former is seen as Jesus' secret coming FOR His Church, while the latter is seen as Jesus' public coming WITH His Church. The Rapture is also said to be imminent. In Pre-Tribulationism the doctrine of imminency implies that there are not, and indeed there cannot be, any precursors, convergences, or signs leading up to the Rapture itself. It can happen at any time, and at any moment just as a thief coming unexpected in the night. Another key feature is that it teaches that the whole of Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> Week comprises both the Tribulation and the Day of the Lord's Wrath from which all New Testament believers are exempt. In short, the final seven-year period from start to finish constitutes the Day of the Lord, which constitutes the Divine wrath of God. And since the Church is exempt from the Divine wrath of God, the Church must be exempt from the Tribulation Period. Consequently, the Rapture is of necessity Pre-tribulational. For if it were not pre-tribulational, then Christians would taste Divine wrath, and this is not possible. As such the rapture takes place before the beginning of the final seven years of Tribulation and then the Church returns with Christ at His second coming seven years later after the Tribulation is over. During the seven years of Tribulation the Church will be safe in heaven with Jesus and will experience the Bema Seat judgment in preparation for the celebration of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. This view draws a strong impassible distinction between God's dealings with Israel and His dealings with the Church. This is another reason why the Rapture must be Pre-Tribulational. Since, as proponents posit, the Tribulation is ONLY for the Jew, then the Church has to be removed. Only then can God deal with Israel. While God deals with Israel on earth, Jesus is dealing with the Church in heaven. Once the Tribulation concludes, then the Church can come back to the earth and Israel and the Church will be united in the Kingdom! In the Kingdom Jews will be non-glorified, and the Church glorified. There will also be non-glorified believing Gentiles.