

BIBLICAL PROPHECY

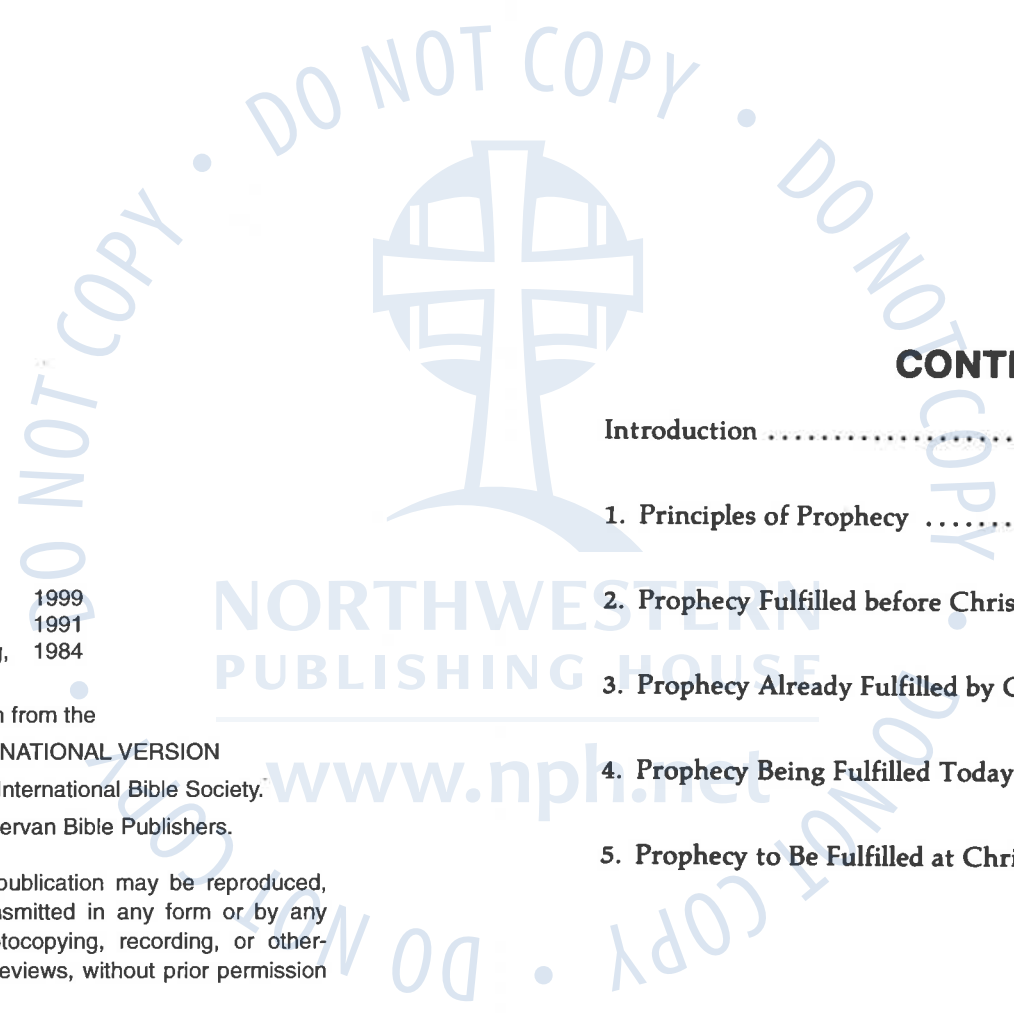
A Bible Study Course for Adults

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NORTHWESTERN
PUBLISHING HOUSE

www.nph.net

250.08R1C -- Biblical Prophecy SG 1999



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Fourth printing, 1999
Third printing, 1991
Second printing, 1984

Scripture taken from the

HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

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Northwestern Publishing House
1250 N. 113th St., Milwaukee, WI 53226-3284
© 1980 by Northwestern Publishing House.
Published 1980
Printed in the United States of America
ISBN 0-8100-0112-8



INTRODUCTION

This course is intended to be a survey of biblical prophecy. This is a very important topic for study at the present time because of the great confusion that exists about prophecy today. On the one hand, critics of the Bible deny the reality of prophecy. On the other hand, many people are weaving fanciful interpretations of prophecy out of their own imagination. We need a thorough understanding of biblical prophecy to combat these distortions, as well as for the positive value which biblical prophecy has for our faith.

This course is designed to be somewhat flexible in the number of hours which are spent studying each part. There are five parts to the course, but two or more class hours can easily be spent on each part. The number of class sessions can be stretched or shortened to fit your local schedule.

We suggest the following schedule:

- Part 1: Principles of Prophecy (3 hours)
- Part 2: Prophecy Fulfilled before Christ's Birth (3 hours)
- Part 3: Prophecy Already Fulfilled by Christ (4 hours)
- Part 4: Prophecy Being Fulfilled Today (2 hours)
- Part 5: Prophecy to Be Fulfilled at Christ's Return (3 hours)

Suggested divisions for each part will be marked within the lessons themselves, but these are intended as helpful guidelines rather than as a rigid schedule. The time which you spend on each part can vary greatly, depending on how much you discuss each of the listed passages. Try not to get bogged down on any one point, but adopt a schedule which will best fit your needs and interests.

1. PRINCIPLES OF PROPHECY

Session One

PROPHECY

A prophet is a person who speaks for God. The word "prophet" may mean either "a person called by God"; or "a person who calls out God's message." The biblical prophet is both "called by God" and "a caller for God."

Although the prophets of the Lord often foretold the future, biblical prophecy is not limited to that. Anyone who is delivering God's message to people is acting as a prophet in the wide sense of the term. Moses was a prophet when he went and commanded the Pharaoh to let Israel go. Nathan was acting as a prophet when he rebuked David for his sin. John the Baptist was a prophet when he called the nation of Israel to repentance. Our pastors are prophets when they deliver God's Word to us.

The prophet's basic task, then, is preaching the law and the gospel, calling to repentance and offering forgiveness.

In this course, however, we shall use the word prophecy in its narrow sense of predicting the future.

TYPES OF PROPHECY

Biblical prophecy occurs in a rich variety of styles and deals with many topics.

Prophecy may deal with matters **small or great**. Samuel predicted that Saul would find his father's donkeys (1 Samuel 9:20). Jesus predicted that Peter would find a coin in a fish's mouth (Matthew 17:27), that his disciples would find a donkey colt for Palm Sunday (Matthew 21:2) and that Peter and John would see a man with a jar of water on Maundy Thursday (Luke 22:8-10). On the other hand, prophecy foretold such great events as the Flood, both destructions of Jerusalem, Jesus' death and resurrection, and the end of the world.

Prophecy may cover a **short or long period**. Many prophecies, such as some of those above, were fulfilled the same day that they were spoken. Others were given thousands of years before their fulfillment, such as the first promises of both Christ's first and second comings. We should not be discouraged if it seems like it is taking a long time for prophecy to be fulfilled.

READ Habakkuk 2:3; 2 Peter 3:3-10.

Why do some people scoff at the prophecy of Christ's return?
Why has God seemingly delayed the fulfillment of this prophecy?

Prophecy may be **conditional or unconditional**. Unconditional prophecies are sure of fulfillment simply because God has promised them. Examples of unconditional prophecies are those which foretell Christ's birth, death, resurrection and return. Conditional prophecies would be fulfilled only if the people who received them met certain conditions. God's promise of blessing or threat of punishment often depended on the faith or unbelief of those who received them. For example, Jonah foretold the destruction of Nineveh. The threat of immediate fulfillment was lifted when the people involved repented. For examples of conditional prophecy read Jeremiah 18:7-10 and 26:2-6,12-15. What conditions were attached to these prophecies?

A change in conditions may affect the manner or time of fulfillment. God had foretold the scattering of the tribes of Simeon and Levi as punishment for Simeon and Levi's cruelty (Genesis 49:5-7), but after the tribe of Levi stood up for Moses in the incident of the Golden Calf, their scattering in Israel became a blessing, since they were scattered as priests to serve throughout Israel. The tribe of Simeon, however, simply disappeared within Judah. The time of

Judah's destruction was postponed by the reforms of the Kings Hezekiah and Josiah. Cf. 2 Chronicles 34:24-33.

Biblical prophecy occurred in many forms, both in **literal and figurative** language.

Some prophecies were delivered as **dreams or night visions**. Examples are Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the image, which was interpreted by Daniel (Daniel 2), Jacob's dream of the ladder at Bethel (Genesis 28) and Joseph's dreams about his family (Genesis 37).

Some prophecies were given in **visions** in which the prophet was in a trancelike state. Examples are Balaam (Numbers 24:4,15,16), Paul (Acts 22:17) and John (Revelation 1:10). Some men, like Balaam, Saul (1 Samuel 19) and Caiaphas (John 11:51) prophesied against their own will.

Some prophecy was received by **direct encounter** with God. Abraham received a promise of a son from the man who appeared to him (Genesis 18). In some cases angels delivered the prophetic message, as in the announcements of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus. In some cases there may have been no visible sign of the prophetic inspiration. When the apostles wrote their epistles, which contain many prophecies, they apparently looked just like any other person writing or dictating a letter. But in all these various methods, the same principle applied.

READ 2 Peter 1:19-21.

What is the basic principle of prophecy?

Session Two

Though many prophecies are given in plain literal language, others are given in more symbolic forms.

Some prophecies are **types**. That means that a historical person, event or thing in the Old Testament corresponds to a person, event or thing in the New Testament. This correspondence is present because God controls all history. He caused the Old Testament event to picture the New Testament event which is the ultimate fulfillment of his plans. A type may be a person. Many aspects of the life of King David are types of Christ, the true King. Melchizedek is a type of Christ, the true Priest. A type may be an event. God's delivery of Israel from Egypt was typical of Christ's work of redemption and of God's bringing Christ out of Egypt (cf. Hosea 11:1;

Matthew 2:14,15). A type may be a thing. The Passover lamb is typical of Christ, the Lamb of God.

Every prophecy has one distinct meaning. However, it may be fulfilled by more than one event. Isaiah prophesied delivery for Israel. This prophecy was fulfilled in part by the return from the Babylonian Captivity. However, it was only fulfilled completely by the coming of Christ. In Matthew 24 Christ speaks of the fall of Jerusalem and the end of the world as related judgments of God.

A prophet may act out his prophecy with **symbolic actions**. For examples of this refer to Jeremiah 19; 27:1-11; Hosea 1-3 and Ezekiel 4 and 5. What were the symbolic actions involved in these prophecies?

Many prophecies were delivered in **symbolic language**. This is especially common in the visions of Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah and John. One form of symbolic language is when an everyday object represents a spiritual reality. The candlesticks in Revelation represent congregations. The beasts in Daniel represent kingdoms. Another form of symbolical language uses terms taken from Old Testament life to describe events in the New Testament or terms from earthly life to describe things in heaven. For example, the New Testament enemies of God's people are called Babylon after their Old Testament enemy. Events in the history of the New Testament church are described in terms of Israel's past. Heaven is described as Jerusalem, Paradise or a wedding feast.

It is important to note that truths which are taught in symbolic language in Scripture are also taught elsewhere in plain literal language. Compare Revelation 12:13,14 and Matthew 16:18. What truth is taught in both ways in these two passages? Make the same comparison with Amos 9:11,12 and Isaiah 60:3.

Session Three

Satan also sends **false prophecy** in imitation of true prophecy. God's true prophets have 100% accuracy in their predictions. Satan's false prophets make some true predictions, but some of their predictions fail. The decisive test in judging a prophet is whether his teachings agree with the previous revelations of God. Cf. Deuteronomy 18:20-22; Isaiah 8:10,20.

READ Deuteronomy 18:18 and Hebrews 1:1,2.

Who is the ultimate prophet?

Why are the varied methods of prophecy used in the past not needed now?

WHY STUDY PROPHECY?

1. Prophecy shows the glory of the true God. It shows us that he is in control of history and we can count on him and his Word. READ Isaiah 41:21-29; 46:9,10; John 13:10,11.
2. Prophecy directs us to Christ as the true Savior. READ Luke 24:44,45; John 5:39; 1 Peter 1:10-12; 2 Peter 1:19.
3. Prophecy prepares us for events still coming. READ Matthew 24:32,33.
4. Prophecy influences our conduct in the present. READ 2 Peter 3:11,14.
5. Prophecy makes up a great part of God's Word. Payne's **Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy** studies over 700 individual prophecies. There are 8,352 verses containing elements of prophecy in the Bible's 31,124 verses.
6. A study of the Biblical prophecies in their context and according to the Bible's own method of interpretation will help guard us against some of the false views of prophecy being promoted today.

In the next sessions we will study biblical prophecies according to four categories:

- Prophecies fulfilled during the Old Testament.
- Prophecies fulfilled at Christ's first coming.
- Prophecies being fulfilled today.
- Prophecies to be fulfilled at Christ's return.