**PRINCIPALS OF PROPHECY**

**INTRODUCTION.**

**Prophecy is so very interesting and intriguing. People are fascinated by the very thought that some passage of scripture foretells some future event, beyond the time of its writing. For that reason there are countless books and studies available, all seeking to unravel the great mysteries of prophetic utterances. Even the prophet himself, given a vision of something about the future, does not always know the answer to his own writings. Some of the things Daniel saw and wrote about, he was told to seal up for a later time.**

**While we certainly won’t understand all of the prophetic passages of the Bible, that should not keep us from having a genuine interest in them and how they may affect our faith and life. God did not give them just to fill up space, but for the guide and inspiration of his people.**

**Prophecy, like any other portion of the Bible, must be rightly interpreted. There are so many concepts and opinions available that it can leave you confused as to what to believe. For that reason, I believe that it is important first of all, before considering any specific prophetic passage, to establish some guidelines of interpretation. We will call them “PRINCIPALS OF PROPHECY”. These will help us find the answers to prophecy and hopefully, keep us from being arbitrary or reckless in our studies and conclusions.**

**PRINCIPAL # 1. THE PURPOSE OF PROPHECY.**

**Prophecy is a road map of the journey of God’s people while they are on the stage of action. It is not a mystery to remain hidden, but a revelation to make known. It is not a piece-meal, scramble of religious events, with no pattern or connection in its message. It is not a disconnected, random, accumulation of future things. It is a prophetic picture of the unfolding of history as it relates to and impacts the church. To study the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation, is to take a journey, from the time of Daniel to the end of the church age, with highlights of the journey all along the way. It will provide us with a view of the path God’s people have followed from then until now or until the end of the prophetic time line. It will harmonize with the Bible; glorify God; inspire our hearts; draw you into closer fellowship with the church of the ages, and finally, give you a sense that your long awaited hope of eternal life in Christ is drawing near. So let’s begin the journey!**

**PRINCIPAL # 2. HISTORY IS THE ONLY ANSWER TO PROPHECY.**

**We all believe that Jesus will come to this earth again, but can you tell me the exact date? Obviously not. The occurrence of the event itself (history) will give us that answer. Thus, “HISTORY IS THE ONLY ANSWER TO PROPHECY”. If someone holds that certain events foretold in prophecy have not yet come to pass, it is virtually impossible to correctly foretell their details. This is a critical point of prophecy. What this principal says to us is that only the known fulfillment of a prophesied event in history, will verify what it was intended to be. Without the event prophesied having occurred, and you having knowledge of its occurrence, in sufficient detail to compliment the requirements of the prophetic text, you cannot rightly interpret it. Sure, God has the ability to explain to you exactly what it is before it happens. He just does not follow a pattern of doing that. Of all the prophecy of the coming of Christ to Bethlehem, no one still could say when it was; only that they expected it to happen.**

**If God prophesies that there will be a beast rising up out of the sea with 7 heads and 10 horns on it, then you don’t speculate as to what this beast might be. You can’t just arbitrarily decide that the mark of the beast is social security, TV or internet, with not historical evidence. Even searching the scriptures before it occurs will not necessarily reveal it to you. In all the O.T. prophecies about Christ, they did not have a full revelation of what they were. This is true even though their great hope was in his coming. I Pet. 1:10-12, tells us that the O.T. prophets searched earnestly, seeking to understand what they were prophesying about. Even Daniel was told to seal up the book (of his visions) because they were for a time to come.**

**Keep in mind that in many instances the Bible becomes an amazing and accurate historical resource for prophecy. When something prophesied in the Bible, also has a record of its fulfillment in the Bible, you have the very best of both worlds: prophecy and its fulfillment, with divine historical evidence to prove it. Let’s put this principal to the test.**

**a. Zechariah 9:9, prophesies that their king would one day ride on a colt the foal of an ass into Jerusalem. In Mt. 21:5, Jesus is described as riding upon a colt, the foal of an ass, entering Jerusalem. You have here, both prophecy and history. Without this history, we would not know if Zechariah’s prophecy had ever been fulfilled.**

**b. Zechariah 11:12, prophesies that Jesus would be sold for 30 pieces of silver. Mt. 26:15, tells us that Judas covenanted to betray Jesus for 30 pcs. Of silver.**

**c. Michal 5:2, prophesies that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem. In Mt. 2:6, it is historically (and divinely) confirmed that Jesus was, indeed, born in Bethlehem.**

**d. In Ps. 16:10-11, David prophesies that Jesus would be resurrected from the grave. In Acts 2:25-31, Peter quotes these very scriptures, testifying that Jesus was risen.**

**In each of these examples, a prophecy was made, and the historical record reveals the fulfillment of it. Not only do the gospels and Acts provide historical proof of these events, but secular history also testifies to it.**

**Suppose for a moment that we did not have any N.T., nor any secular history of the years that covered the life of Christ. In such case, you would have no history of these prophesies ever having been fulfilled. Consequently, you would not know if Christ had been born as the O.T. had foretold that he would, because the O.T. gave no dates for these events.**

**Many more examples could be given, but these should satisfy us that history is a vital component in the accurate interpretation of prophecy. This principal will be abundantly verified as we study specific prophesies of Daniel and Revelation.**

**I urge anyone who desires to learn more about the great truths of Daniel and Revelation, to first of all acquire a good understanding of the history from Daniel to the time of Christ and from the time of Christ throughout the history of the church. In fact, without a knowledge of the applicable history, prophecy will have very little value to you. I am a staunch advocate of the idea, that if you do not have a minimal working knowledge of the history of the church age, then you do yourself and the Lord a disservice by even trying to interpret Revelation.**

**PRINCIPAL # 3. PROPHECY AND SYMBOLS.**

**In Rev. 12:1, there is a prophecy of a woman, “clothed with the sun”, “ the moon under her feet”, and “a crown of 12 stars on her head”. To apply a literal interpretation of this woman would be ludicrous. Think about it. A literal, physical woman big enough to be clothed with the literal sun??, standing on the moon, with a crown of 12 stars on her head. To interpret this literally would accuse the scriptures of a preposterous incongruity.**

**Then there is the great image of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, in Dan. Ch. 2. A head of gold, chest and arms of silver, thighs of brass, legs of iron, etc. From the very description of this image, we know that we are dealing with symbols, metaphors and figurative objects, that are used to represent some reality other than the image itself. In this instance, Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar, Dan. 2:38: thou art this head of gold. Thus, gold was used to symbolize Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian empire. This will be more thoroughly verified as we make our study of this great image.**

**Throughout the books of Daniel and Revelation, we are constantly reading about various beasts, some with many heads and horns; dragons, chains, bottomless pits, leopards, lions, bears, goats, harlots, cities coming down from heaven, a tree in the middle of a river and on both sides of a river, a little horn with something growing out of it, a ram run over by a he goat, and a large number of such expressions making up prophecy.**

**There is an interesting point in Rev. 1:1, where God is opening up the Revelation to John. That point is the statement that these things were “signified” to his servant John. That is, he sign – I – fied it, or gave it in sign language. This is how Daniel and Revelation are written. Symbols are used to convey the desired message.**

**The principal we are to observe and use here then, is that prophetic visions are given first in symbolic language. Symbolic language is used to represent the ultimate objective of the prophecy. A major point of truth regarding the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation (and others ) is that it is impossible to use a literalized interpretation for these visions and maintain a viable, realistic, scripturally sound application. Symbols are absolutely essential.**

**The question arises therefore, why did God employ symbols at all. This is a moot question since it is obvious that God has used symbols, and what gain is there in questioning his wisdom. The Bible says it is the glory of God to conceal a matter and the honor of kings to search it out. The Bible also teaches us that God conceals a thing from the wise and prudent, and reveals it unto babes. To understand what a prophetic vision means, carries a very special blessing and inspiration with it. But to gain that understanding will not come by intellectual deciphering, comprehension and understanding. It was first imparted by specific divine revelation to the prophet, and I believe the same divine revelation is necessary to understand it. This means that we will not come to an understanding of prophecy by intense study and intellectual genius. We must seek and pray and ask God to reveal that which the carnal mind cannot unveil. This, at least in part, may be the reason these prophecies are presented in symbols.**

**This also raises another critical point with regard to symbols and their application. That point is that you cannot arbitrarily interpret the meaning and application of symbols. This tells us that if we interpret a “beast” to represent a civil power in one chapter, you cannot give the same symbol an altogether different meaning in another chapter. It is true that different symbols at times may be used to represent the same object. An example might be the head of gold of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream representing Babylon, and a lion in chapter 7 representing the same empire.**

**Since it will not work to arbitrarily assign a (convenient) meaning to a symbol, no matter what it is, just how can you be consistent in your interpretation of them. In Dan. 7, Daniel receives a vision that is represented by 4 beasts: lion, bear, leopard, and a nondescript one. Then in verse 17, Daniel is told that these 4 beasts are 4 kings, i.e., 4 kingdoms, empires or civil powers. Thus, beasts are used here as symbolic of a world power or empire. This application, we will find, holds true throughout Daniel and Revelation. A beast represents a civil power in Daniel, and likewise in Revelation. It would be arbitrary to interpret a beast as a civil power in one place and as representing something altogether different in another.**

**Prophecy, therefore, is given in symbols. It will not work to use a literal application to unravel the great visions as of a woman wearing the literal sun and standing on the moon and wearing 12 stars. We must find out what these symbols mean.**

**Finally the Bible is the best source of understanding what a symbol means. One example to illustrate this point. In Rev. 17:1, you have a picture of a great whore that “sitteth upon many waters”. Verse 15 of this chapter explains this symbol of “waters” to be: “peoples, multitudes, nations and tongues. Thus the Bible interprets this symbol for us.**

**Symbols are essential in prophecy. They must be consistently applied. The Bible is the best source of finding the interpretation of them.**

**PRINCIPAL # 4. THE ENTIRE VISION.**

**The 9th chapter of Daniel is popular among prophecy writers. One book I have, the writer confines his entire writing on just the 24th verse of this chapter, and in fact, excluded part of that one verse. As a result his conclusions on this one verse leaves serious unanswered questions regarding the rest of the prophetic vision of this chapter.**

**The principal is that you cannot extract just portions of a given prophecy without the likelihood of error in your interpretation. You must harmonize the entire vision. It may well be that some fine point might not be clear to you. That will happen. It also might be that one fine point might hold the key to the particular prophecy. But you cannot base your interpretation on a single segment of the vision, at the risk of it not harmonizing with the rest of it. This is a fallacy that occurs many times in Biblical interpretation. I can think of many subjects and passages of scripture, where portions of it are not considered in the process of interpretation. The great image of Daniel 2, has several parts and metals in its whole make up. It would not be fair to take the gold head and try to make some application out of it that did not fit with all the rest. This principal should be obvious, but, alas, it happens only too frequently. You cannot extract just the verses of a prophecy that you like, you must deal with the whole.**

**PRINCIPAL # 5. KEY VERSE(S)**

**We have already looked at Rev. 17:1, that depicts the great whore sitting upon many waters. If we had no other information or help, we would have difficulty understanding what these “waters” are. Do they refer to the Mediterranean Sea, the Jordan River or the Euphrates, etc.? We don’t have to guess or be arbitrary in our interpretation. The 15th verse gives us the answer. The water upon which the great whore is sitting represents peoples, multitudes, nations and tongues. So we know from this that this great whore must represent some form of ruling power that has a multitude of people under her control. This 15th verse then, is a “key” verse in understanding this portion of scripture. This principal also applies to the interpretation of many other subjects other than prophecy.**

**Another example of this is the great image of Daniel, ch. 2. When Daniel explains this image to Nebuchadnezzar, he tells him in verse 38: “thou art this head of gold”. This is another key verse as you seek to understand what this image really represents.**

**In Daniel, ch. 7, he sees 4 beasts in his vision. The 17th verse of this chapter tells us that these 4 beasts are 4 kings (kingdoms). Thus, you have a key to understanding that the 4 beasts are representative of civil powers or kingdoms.**

**We believe and teach water baptism in the name of Jesus. We didn’t just arbitrarily decide that would be nice to do. Passages of scripture such as: Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48, and 19:5, are key verses in our interpretation of the baptismal name.**

**And thus it is for prophecy (and other subjects also), there is usually a key verse that will help unlock the whole passage. We should look carefully for it to anchor our interpretation on. It will keep you from wandering into imaginary things. Look for it.**

**PRINCIPAL # 6 PROPHETIC TIME**

**In our studies of Daniel and Revelation, we will encounter prophetic time periods that are expressed as: time, times, and dividing of time, Dan. 7:25; 2300 days, Dan. 8:14; 70 weeks, Dan. 9:24; 42 months, Rev. 11:2; 1260 days, Rev. 11:3; 1260 days, Rev. 12:6; 42 months, Rev. 13:5; 3 ½ days, Rev. 11:11; 1000 years, Rev. 20:4, and others. These time periods form a very integral part of the vision portrayed. The question this raises is, how do we interpret these time periods.**

**To begin with, let us determine what these time periods that are expressed in these different manners, would amount to if they were interpreted as simple, actual, literal time.**

**a. One time we have time, times, and dividing of time. 3 ½ years actual. b. Two times we have 1260 days. 3 ½ years actual. c. Two times we have 42 months. 3 ½ years actual. d. We have 70 weeks. 1 yr. 18 wks. actual. e. We have 2300 days. 6 yrs. 140 days. f. 3 ½ days. 3 ½ days. g. 1000 years. 1000 yrs. actual.**

**There are other periods of time we may encounter, but these are the most prominent. It is interesting to note that several of the above examples, expressed in different ways, yet have the same real time. The question before us is, how should you apply these time periods when used in a prophetic time setting?**

**Certain principals should prevail in our application of prophetic time. First, we should be consistent in the interpretation of all time periods, unless certain extreme and obvious circumstances warrant a departure from that norm. Secondly, we cannot ignore these references to time, because they have significant meaning for the prophecy in hand. In fact, the time periods in a given prophecy, will restrict such prophecy to the time period applicable. Another principal that will control the interpretation of prophetic time, is the text itself, and the events it defines. Since history is a vital principal in the interpretation of prophecy, the time element given in such prophecy, we will see, will conform to or define the history applicable.**

**There is a general rule, long recognized as the standard for interpreting prophetic time. This rule is the “day for a year” principal. That is to say, where you find a day of prophetic time, it is interpreted to be a year of actual time. Thus, 1260 prophetic days, becomes 1260 years of actual, historical time.**

**The precedent for this method of interpreting prophetic time is found in Num. 14:34, and Eze. 4:6. In Numbers 14, God was wroth with Israel because they had believed the evil report of the 10 spies who reported that they could not conquer the land due to the giants that were there. They had spent 40 days spying out the land, so God decreed that they would subsequently wander in the wilderness for 40 years for their unbelief. Thus their 40 days spying out the land translated into 40 years of wilderness wandering. We know that is how long Israel did wander around in the wilderness, until finally entering Canaan land.**

**In Eze. 4:4-6, God is demonstrating his displeasure with both the house of Israel and the house of Judah. Ezekiel was to lie on his left side for the iniquity of the house of Israel, and on his right side for the house of Judah. In each case, Ezekiel is to lie on his side “a day for a year”. These two scriptures provide us the principal generally accepted as the rule for interpreting prophetic time: “each day for a year”.**

**In each of the examples given in Numbers and Ezekiel, the cause for the event was the sins of the people in some manner. We will need to look for a similar cause in our prophetic time periods, when applying the day for a year principal.**

**In our application of these various principals for interpreting prophetic time, latitude should be left for obvious and compelling and extreme differences. They will occur. The time period of Rev. 20, is a case in point. The time period there is 1000 years. This is a favorite passage and time frame with prophecy writers and expositors. If you apply the day for a year principal to this, you can easily see how totally incompatible, even incongruous it is. One thousand years translated by the day for a year principal, would become 365,000 years. Clearly, this number of years would not harmonize with anything the Bible teaches regarding the kingdom of God or prophecy. And since prophecy is for time and not eternity, this becomes an obvious extreme that would require another application. The only way to deal with this time period is to leave it as actual 1000 years. This is the conclusion of the vast majority of commentators on this passage, even when they do not all agree as to when the 1000 years actually take place. Keep in mind, to treat it otherwise, you must also harmonize the other components of this chapter with that treatment.**

**Another factor in the application of prophetic time that is important to note, is our way of reckoning of time or calendars. Calendars have been changed over the centuries and the calendar we use today was not in use when the prophecies we will deal with were written. While this will not be a major problem, yet it can cause some confusion if it is not considered. The calendar is a means of accounting for the cycles produced by the sun, moon and earth and their rotations in relation to each other. There never has been a calendar that would exactly correlate all of this. Calendars must have adjustments built into them to correct for their inability to cover the exact time of a solar year. Thus, in 2008, our calendar will give us a “leap year”, when we have 29 days instead of 28 in February. This happens every 4 years in order to make the necessary adjustments between our calendar year and the solar year.**

**In prophetic time there has been a general principal of allocating 360 days to a prophetic year, (30 days a month times 12 months). Obviously, this creates a minor discrepancy over a long period of time. However, we should keep in mind that history of major events does not always start at “8 O’clock, January 1st , and end precisely at 12 O’clock, April 15”, as an example. For the United States, the second world war started on Dec. 7, 1941, when the truth is it had already been going on for some time. Thus it is, that history with its exact dates, may also have some start up and winding down time also. Here again, the specific text will correlate with the time element to restrict the event to its proper purpose. All this being said, we will follow the 360 year cycle, most nearly representing the calendar function under the Hebrew era.**

**PRINCIPAL # 7 THE PRINCIPAL OF REPETITION.**

**In the books of Daniel and Revelation, there are many different visions. Each of these visions will portray a different event. When interpreting the events, a serious problem arises if you try to apply them in some chronological or textually advancing order. For example, man expositors interpret the first 3 chapters of Revelation as applicable to events in church history, from its beginning until the end. Then, beginning with chapter 4 and for the rest of the book, they place all the subsequent visions after the completion of chapter 3. Thus, when they get to chapters near the end of the book, they apply these after the end of the events of the first 3 chapters, which they have already extended to the end of the Christian era. The result is that these later chapters, in the view of many, occur beyond the end of the Christian era, into something similar to a twilight zone to accommodate other interpretations. But there are some very real problems with this procedure that must be dealt with.**

**We believe that the facts will demonstrate that the different visions of both Daniel and Revelation, will repeat all or some of the same time frame, while at the same time bringing out different details of events that occurred during this same time frame. One vision will bring out details of one type of event, while another, covering the same general time period, will bring out altogether different details. Thus, there is a “repetition” of the use of the time periods, while discussing different events.**

**To illustrate this point, think of the year 1776, in the history of the United States. Many books have been written, devoted to the great work of our declaration of independence and constitution of this time period. Meanwhile, other books have been written, devoted entirely to the great struggle of the revolutionary war, part of that same period of time. The time was the same, but the subject matter was different. This is a principal that will be of great importance in our application of the various visions we encounter. Just because they may be recorded in different and extended chapters, running consecutively to each other, does not mean that they do not go over the same time period. A classic example of this would be chapters 2 and 7 of Daniel, which gives a vision of a great image in one chapter and a vision of 4 beasts in another, but they cover the very same time frame. This principal of “repetition” will help us later.**

**PRINCIPAL # 8. THE BIBLE PRINCIPAL.**

**This next principal, number 8, is really applicable to and a kind of wrap around for all the other principals we have discussed.**

**The Bible is the absolute, final rule in the interpretation of any prophecy or of any other Christian principal or doctrine.**

**The Bible is its own best interpreter.**

**Prophecy interpretations must conform to basic Bible doctrine without exception.**

**Prophecy should not be used to establish basic doctrine.**

**Prophecy, connected with sound biblical doctrine, will bless you beyond imagination.**

**Basic doctrines that are not sound biblically, can lead you on a wrong path with prophecy.**

**God can reveal prophetic truth to the least of us, the same as He can basic doctrine.**

**Biblically based doctrine will be a help to you in interpreting prophecy.**

**The Bible is the best source for interpreting prophetic symbols.**

**Prophecy is a part of the Bible for the benefit of all of God’s children, the same as other parts of the Bible are. It is for the church age and not the eternal age.**

**Finally, there is a great blessing in store to those who diligently seek the Lord, through his word along with the appropriate applications of the principals of prophecy interpretation. It is not easy, nor on the surface and we dare not be arbitrary or impatient in our pursuit of the proper understanding. It will require a lot of hours of study, prayer and teaching to arrive at the desired goal. With a hungry, seeking heart, God can do wonders. It will not be wise to randomly jump about just so we can explore those passages of prophecy which are of the greatest interest to us. We must take our time, especially to begin with, and slowly build a good foundation as we proceed. We will work together; discuss together, and do homework study together, and thus learn together.**

**Our goals will include: a basic understanding of the overall prophetic work of Daniel and Revelation; our personal enlightenment and joy; to be rightly guided as we think of these great prophetic works of the church; to have a stronger foundation and appreciation for the Bible; to encourage our hearts in the Christian hope of the coming of the Lord and eternal life; and last but not least, to give honor and glory to God for his wisdom and mercy in giving us this wonderful privilege.**