

an introduction to  
*Preparing for End Times*

*a new approach to*

**END TIMES**

*Prophecy*

CLAY WATTS

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***A New Approach to End Times Prophecy: A Brief Introduction to Preparing for End Times*** is written from the perspective that the Bible is the inspired Word of God and that Jesus is returning for his bride prior to a thousand-year reign on earth. The author holds to a literal view of the Bible as a futurist and pre-millennialist without a particular rapture position.

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## INTRODUCTION

I 'd like to share with you some thoughts and principles on end times Bible prophecy. I'm going to take a slightly different approach than most, so I think you'll be challenged, no matter what your background in this area.

I am a Pentecostal/Charismatic lay Bible teacher specializing in end times issues. I take a literal view of the Bible and am a futurist and pre-millennialist, but I do not ascribe to a particular rapture position.

Before we begin, I'd like to relate a brief conversation at the conclusion of a prophecy discussion group I hosted a couple of years ago. I was visiting with a new couple who had only been in our Pentecostal church for a few weeks. He was from a Mennonite background and she was from a Baptist church. They said that this was all new to them, but that they had had a lot of teaching on end times Bible prophecy. I told them that my special interest was in promoting flexibility of interpretation. The husband smiled and said, "Yes, I agree that we should be very flexible. I think God is going to surprise us all!"

That really summarizes my position as well. I regularly come across thoughtful, knowledgeable lay people who have developed the same conclusion after becoming aware of the many different so-called "expert" opinions. However, in case you think it's a little simplistic or just a cop-out, I hope to show that it's really quite a sophisticated position. And furthermore, it has serious implications for how we need to prepare for end times. It's not at all obvious or trivial.

So, let's begin. My purpose is to challenge you with a new paradigm, or way of thinking, about end times. I am not trying to convince you of a particular rapture position. I am not proposing a method for deciphering Revelation. Rather, I want to build a case for how to approach end times prophecy as a whole. This consists of five main theses. I will state each one, along with supporting principles, and then illustrate them with both scriptural and personal examples. When we're done, I hope to have influenced your thinking, at least a little. Even more importantly, I hope this will help better prepare you for end times, especially if you have teaching responsibilities. And finally, I hope that we will all move a little further towards unity in the body of Christ regarding this critical topic.

# 1

## THESIS ONE

“Prophecy is not meant to be figured out in advance.”

**T**he first thesis is that prophecy is not meant to be figured out in advance. A more precise way of saying this is that we should not feel obligated to develop a single interpretation of prophetic passages that becomes essentially equivalent to doctrine.

It almost seems obvious when stated this way. Why would we presume to know exactly how mysterious prophetic passages are to be fulfilled? However, most preachers and teachers of the Word spend a great deal of time exploring Bible passages with one goal in mind. We want to explain what the passage really means. Sure, we recognize that there are different levels of application, but we usually believe that we should be able to discern the single intent that the Holy Spirit has embedded in the words. This often includes determining whether the passage is to be understood literally, figuratively, symbolically, etc., the context and times in which it was written, the author’s intent, the original audience’s situation, and so forth.

Now this is a wonderful objective for much of Scripture. We need to have sound doctrine that is based on careful exegesis of God’s Word using accepted principles of interpretation. Jesus commanded the body of believers to be in unity around the basic doctrines of the church. And

actually, the statements of faith of most Christian groups largely agree with one another.

There are areas of difference, of course. Some of these differences may be misinterpretations or misunderstandings by some groups, to their detriment. Being a Pentecostal, for example, I feel that those who don't allow the Holy Spirit to work supernaturally today through personal guidance and scriptural gifts are unnecessarily limiting their doctrine and the benefits they can receive. I believe, however, that in many cases of apparent doctrinal differences the real answer may encompass multiple views. Our Western minds don't like to accept different viewpoints, especially if they seem to be mutually exclusive. Instead, we love to make distinctions and put things in neat categories. It must be either white or black, but not both.

One example is whether to take a passage as literal or figurative. Perhaps it can, and often should, be understood both ways. As another example, perhaps we don't have to choose between the doctrines of free will and predestination. Perhaps both are mysteriously at work in the believer who is completely yielded to Christ. We certainly find many scriptures that support both perspectives. It may just be our linear, rationalistic, Western mind-set that keeps us from seeing the bigger picture, like the proverbial blind men trying to describe an elephant. In any event, we should simply trust God to resolve the two, even if we can't.

So we need to handle very carefully those doctrines that seem to have scriptural support for more than one interpretation. Then how much more carefully should we handle prophetic scripture that refers to future events? Especially when many of these passages contain intentionally mysterious or figurative language. Is it even reasonable to expect that we should determine a single valid interpretation of any or all of the book of Revelation, for example? It seems more likely to me that the reason this kind of language is used is to indicate that we are often not to make such interpretations until the time is right. In the meantime, there probably is no harm in speculating on various interpretations. As we stretch our imaginations, we may be more likely

to understand and prepare for however end times events actually play out.

Before we go on, you can already see my bias. I am assuming a futurist view. However, for those of you who are preterist, historicist, or idealist, I would say the same. You certainly have very good reasons for your viewpoints, and they all have a great deal of truth. The issue, however, is whether these explanations preclude others, such as the various futurist views. What's the harm in at least being open to this possibility? So hang with me as we continue down this path.

Let's look at a couple of Bible passages to illustrate this first thesis, that prophecy is not meant to be figured out in advance. First, we have in Daniel chapters 10-12 one of the most important end times prophetic texts. After an astoundingly precise and yet mysterious message, God simply tells Daniel to seal up these words, and that they are to be understood only in the end times. In contrast, Jesus, on the road to Emmaus, chides two of his disciples, saying that they should have understood the many scriptures that applied to the events of the past few days. As a result they did not believe or act appropriately. So, we can see that we are not expected to figure out prophetic scripture too far in advance, but there is a critical point in time when we do need to understand what the Bible and the Holy Spirit are saying to us so we can act in a way that pleases the Father.

The remaining four theses build on this first one, but before we go on, I want to relate a personal example. Many of you are familiar with personal prophecy, where you, or someone you trust, receives a word or impression from the Holy Spirit that applies to your life in a personal way. In my case, my wife and I have typically received such prophetic words prior to a job change that involves a move. We don't usually know the details, and we certainly don't know the timing, but we feel that God, in his grace, is allowing us to get ready for what is coming. We do as much as we can to prepare, but then we rest in faith and wait on him to bring it about, often in an unexpected way.

When we were in Columbus, Ohio, having been moved from Tulsa as a result of a merger (and from Dallas to Tulsa before that), my wife had

left a very good position as a high school principal in a Christian school. After about two years in Columbus, wondering what God was doing, and finally taking a job as a middle school teacher, she began to discern that a big change was coming in our situation. She further felt that, as a matter of obedience, she was to spend several weeks going through the over 125 boxes we still had in our basement from the hasty move to Columbus. This was to prepare for another move, perhaps back to Texas, where our children had grown up and our grandchildren were located. And my wife's heart was still there, by the way.

Sure enough, within days after she had gone through the last box, she received a call from the pastor of the church we had left eight years before in Dallas, where she had also been the high school principal of the Christian school, and the elementary principal before that. Although we had never met the pastor, who had taken the church just after we left, he asked her to consider returning to the Dallas area to lead the school as superintendent.

We were in shock. We were expecting God to do something, but this was bigger than we could have imagined. It was my wife's ultimate dream job. And because of the surprise factor, it was a total delight for both of us. Of course, I had a good job at the time, nearing thirty years with a solid utility company, whose headquarters were in Columbus, so I was somewhat puzzled as to how this was going to work out. But, knowing it was God's perfect will for us, and being prepared months in advance that a change was coming, we stepped out in faith and found a way for her to start her duties immediately, while I was soon able to take advantage of a miraculously timed early retirement offer. And then to add icing to the cake, on my last day of employment, I was told I would be offered a consulting contract with a Dallas law firm that ended up lasting over two years.

I believe that this is a picture of how God's prophetic Word works. He gives us a mysterious word that something wonderful is coming so we can get ready. But then he surprises us with a completely unexpected way of fulfilling it so that we are not just delighted, but in awe at his power and grace and love for us. I don't know about you, but I want to

walk during these end times in that supernatural place of God's protection, anointing, and grace. I don't need to figure out the details ahead of time. I just want to delight myself in the Lord, in his unfathomable wisdom and majesty

# 2

## THESIS TWO

“If we insist on a fixed interpretation of end times prophecy, we can be open to being deceived.”

To recap, the first thesis is that we do not need to figure out end times Bible prophecy in advance. As we shall see later, it's ok to imagine different ways prophecy could be fulfilled, but it's not necessary to analyze it to the point of determining a single interpretation of how the events will occur.

The second thesis takes this a step further. This thesis is that if we insist on holding a fixed interpretation of end times prophecy, we can unwittingly be opening ourselves to being deceived. A shorthand way of saying this is that “preconception leads to deception.” Christ warned us many times to watch that we not be deceived in end times. So let's examine this important principle and see how this has happened in scripture and how it could happen again.

Many of you may remember the emphasis a number of years ago on how paradigms affect the way we think. A paradigm is an unconscious model that we use to process information. A famous example is that of the Swiss watchmakers. The Swiss actually invented the technology for the digital watch, but they didn't bother to patent it since they were sure no one would ever want to wear such a device. Their paradigm was so fixed on the mechanical analog model with springs and gears that they lost out on a huge opportunity. The Japanese had no such

paradigm, or vested interest, so they quickly took advantage of the free technology and we all know what happened as a result. It was a major factor in the ascendancy of the Japanese electronics industry. And it almost ruined the Swiss watch-making industry.

There are many stories in the Bible where people were deceived because of a fixed paradigm or preconception of how things should work. The earliest example is Eve's deception in the Garden. If you think about it, she had never been exposed to death. Her paradigm was that life was eternal perfection. Even though God had explicitly warned Adam and her that they would die if they ate the forbidden fruit, she may have had difficulty imagining what that meant. It certainly didn't fit her experience or expectations. So when Satan challenged what God had said, he offered an alternative that was much more in line with her paradigm, namely, that she would not die, but that she would have even more knowledge. Then, when she ate and did not appear to be harmed, Adam bought into the same deception.

The death of the second Adam, Jesus, may also be partly attributed to this principle. Judas embraced the paradigm that the Christ was going to deliver Israel from their Roman oppressors. This was the common teaching of the time, based on many scriptures. When it became apparent that Jesus was not going to fulfill this expectation, Judas's disappointment was undoubtedly a factor in his being open to the deception of Satan. Some even have conjectured that up until the end he thought his betrayal would force Jesus to confront the Romans. In any case, it is clear that Judas was deceived as to Jesus' identity because he didn't fit his preconception of the conquering Messiah.

Judas wasn't alone, of course. There was a very subtle yet powerful dynamic at work in the minds of most Jews during Jesus' ministry. They had built up such a strong preconception of what Messiah was to be like that they could not see that many scriptures were being fulfilled time after time before their very eyes. His disciples could not even accept Jesus' own statements of his coming redemptive death. Why did this happen? Why were their preconceived ideas so blinding and so firmly held? It would be tempting to explain this away by saying they just

chose to focus on the most popular and easy-to-understand scriptures and ignored those harder to understand.

This is part of it, but there is a deeper, more insidious reason. The Jews wanted to believe a scenario that would justify their own lifestyle and world-view. They thought they had the law and everything else figured out. All they needed was a Messiah to come and install them in their rightful places as the righteous, godly leaders over the nation of Israel. They had totally missed the weightier matters of the law, such as mercy and love. And they were blind to the overall message of salvation from sin that was embedded in every book and story of the Bible. They didn't want to change, much less admit their sin; they wanted to be justified in their comfortable, self-satisfied lifestyles.

And we should not be misled. This was not just a problem with the religious leaders. Jesus' own disciples had some of the same issues. They recognized him as the Christ, but they still couldn't understand the need for him to suffer. They couldn't see the larger redemptive purpose of his ministry.

A modern example of this deception deals again with the nation of Israel. Remember the miraculous Six-Day War in 1967? The Israeli forces pre-empted a much larger Arab enemy with incredible skill, decisiveness, and supernatural intervention. All of their preparation and planning paid off. However, they became overconfident in their own success. They imagined that they were unbeatable. Then, in 1973, the Yom Kippur War burst their bubble of pride. With no warning, the Arabs attacked on the most holy Jewish day, and came very close to defeating Israel. The costly experience taught the Jews a painful lesson. They must never again think of themselves as invincible in the face of their enemy. Rather, they learned to be prepared for anything and to expect the unexpected.

So how does this principle relate to end times prophecy? In a very real way. Suppose we believe we should figure out prophetic events ahead of time. Then we spend a lot of time and effort developing a series of events, or a scenario, that explains as many prophetic Bible passages as possible. We may even make elaborate charts and write books to

explain and defend our findings. At this point, we've got so much invested in it, that we consciously, or unconsciously, begin to think this is the proper "Biblical" interpretation. We try to convince others this is the best way to think about end times. And before long, we are convinced ourselves that other viewpoints are wrong, and ours is right.

But here's the problem. God is sovereign, and as we have seen, he typically surprises us with prophetic fulfillments. So, if and when end times events begin to transpire, but they don't seem to be fitting our preconceived ideas, what is our response? Most likely, we will fall into the deception of believing that the events really aren't the true fulfillment, and that we don't need to pay any attention to them.

For example, suppose we firmly believe that the antichrist will be revealed only after all believers are raptured. (Or that there is no rapture, or perhaps even that there is no antichrist as a person.) Then, suppose some character comes on the world scene who seems to fit all the characteristics, and even begins to do some of the things prophesied of the antichrist/beast. We would then have a difficult choice. We could change our "theology," which is not very likely. Or the simpler choice would be to claim that this cannot be the antichrist because the rapture has not taken place (etc.). Would that be a setup for deception, or what?

Again, I would like to relate this principle of deception through preconception to our own experience with personal prophecy. In the 1970's, when we were in Tulsa, my wife received a word that we would live on five acres with water on it. There was no timing specified in the word. However she would often drive around Tulsa looking for such a place we might someday live, but nothing ever became available.

About five years later we were in the process of moving to Dallas. She remembered the word, and we agreed to see if this was the time for its fulfillment. I spent three frustrating days driving by myself all over the Dallas area looking for such a house. I was about to give up and get a realtor, when my wife called and said someone suggested the Cedar Hill area. So that evening I got a map of the Mid-Cities, spread it out, closed

my eyes, and brought down a felt-tipped pen in the general vicinity of Cedar Hill.

I went the next morning to the ink spot marked on the map, and within a few hundred yards I found two properties for sale. The only problem was that they did not have houses on them. This was certainly not what we were expecting, and I suppose I could have continued to look. But I felt a very strong leading from the Holy Spirit to pursue it. I quickly found that one of the lots was exactly 5.00 acres and that it had a stream running across the back! And the listing realtor was a Christian who happened to have a brother-in-law who built custom houses in the area.

Well, we overcame our disappointment at not having a house to move to right away. Instead, we moved to a rental property and proceeded to design and build our dream house. We moved in a few months later and raised four children on God's five acres.

This story is a part of our family history. It always reminds me to take God's prophetic word seriously and literally, but not to put constraints on how he might choose to fulfill it. Through this and other experiences with prophecy, I've learned to be particularly careful about having expectations on timing or the actual details. I may know the final outcome in general terms, but I've found it's much better just to trust God and let him do it his way.

# 3

## THESIS THREE

“We should become familiar with different end time scenarios.”

So, from these first two principles, we know that it is not helpful to try to figure out end times prophecy in advance, and that to do so invites potential deception. Does that mean we should avoid learning about end times events so that we don't become susceptible to deception? Absolutely not. In fact, my third thesis is that we should become familiar with different end times scenarios. Let's discuss what this means and why it is beneficial.

First, what do I mean by “end times scenarios”? I use this phrase to refer to a hypothetical series of events that could represent one way of fulfilling a set of end times Bible prophecies. A scenario might be as simple as an interpretation of the first six seals of Revelation, or it might be a hypothetical picture of the nations and military movements in the Ezekiel 38 and 39 passages.

Most best-selling Bible prophecy authors have developed a fairly comprehensive framework depicting how they think end times events will play out. They base this on their interpretation of many prophetic passages. For example, Hal Lindsey, one of the earliest and most popular writers, thinks the following scenario is most likely:

1. Christ comes for believers and raptures them to heaven prior to seven years of tribulation.
2. Antichrist is a Roman prince; the false prophet is a Jew.
3. Antichrist makes a mutual protection treaty with Israel.
4. Jews then re-institute the sacrificial system.
5. Egypt, head of the Arab-African confederacy, invades Israel
6. Russia invades the middle-east, motivated by their material wealth and double-crosses the Arab-African confederacy
7. Russia, fearing attack from the orient and antichrist (coming from western Europe), returns to establish headquarters in Jerusalem and is miraculously defeated, causing many Jews to turn to God.
8. Antichrist and oriental forces fight for world control in the valley of Megiddo.
9. Christ returns with believers and defeats antichrist and the oriental forces.

Many people were first introduced to Bible prophecy and concepts like the rapture through Hal Lindsey's books from the 1970's and later. He currently has a weekly television program that examines current events in the light of end times Bible prophecy. However, his views are just one of many. Most people do not realize that there is a wide variance between many of the popular authors in this area. And I'm not talking just about the various rapture positions. I'm talking about writers within the same rapture camp who have quite different interpretations of the antichrist, false prophet, Jewish temple, mark of the beast, seals, trumpets and bowls, Babylon, two witnesses, 144,000 Jews, seven hills, etc.

So, do we need to pay any attention at all to the confusing array of scenarios and interpretations? Aren't we going to be gone before any of this stuff happens? Or if we are here, isn't God going to surprise us

anyway? Why should we worry about it? Well, Christ warned us many times to watch and pray that we not be caught up in the cares of everyday life and be taken unawares by end times events. He also warned us about false christs and prophets who would deceive many, even believers, if that were possible.

So we have a responsibility to be alert and ready. Like the five virgins, we need to have our lamps full of oil at all times. Like Noah, we need to listen to the Holy Spirit to know how to prepare far ahead of time. For when things start happening, it will be too late to begin getting ready. One of many things we can do to get ready now is to learn and imagine different ways end times events could occur. We know that no one of these imagined scenarios is actually going to occur precisely. But as we exercise our Bible knowledge and imagination, we can learn to be flexible in our thinking. We can be better ready to recognize prophetic fulfillment. And we can train ourselves to respond to challenging situations in godly ways.

Most of Christ's disciples did not pass these tests during the days and hours around his death and resurrection. But he has given us plenty of warning and ample time to get ready this time. If we are to be the generation that brings back the King, we must not become drowsy or fail to act appropriately from lack of knowledge.

So how do we do this? How do we learn about end times scenarios and use that experience to get ready? Here's what I suggest. First, do not be afraid to explore many different interpretations of Bible prophecy. Read the popular theological authors, no matter what their views on the rapture. Read fictional novels and see godly movies such as the Left Behind series. And take advantage of the Internet to search out all kinds of facts and opinions about Bible prophecy and especially the relationship to current events.

Get outside your comfort zone, and you will find that there are many different scenarios, most of which have reasonable support from Biblical texts. But do not feel that you have to side with one author or another. Rather, examine how they have interpreted the scriptures, and file away

those ideas that seem to have good textual support. Then, imagine how you would behave if things happen that way.

To illustrate the rich variety of interpretations that you will encounter, I'd like to give some examples organized by popular topics:

**Rapture:** There are a number of popular positions on when the rapture of believers is going to occur. Many believe in a pre-trib rapture that can occur at any time, when Christ comes for his church, to be followed by the seven years of tribulation, at the end of which Christ comes back with his church. The main support for this comes from scriptures that indicate believers will escape the hour of trial. Most believers of this persuasion also subscribe to the dispensational method of Bible interpretation that separates the Jewish and Church ages. This means that the Church will be gone when God deals with the Jews in the tribulation, which is Daniel's seventieth week, i.e., seven years. The post-trib folks believe that Christ comes only one time, and that is for his Bride at the end of the tribulation period when the antichrist is defeated and Christ's rule is established on earth. This means that believers go through the tribulation, but are protected in the hour of trial, much like Noah during the Flood or the Jews during the plagues of Moses. The mid-trib and pre-wrath positions hold that believers will go through some of the tribulation events, but will be raptured before God pours out his wrath on unbelievers as punishment for their unwillingness to repent. This approach often distinguishes between the wrath of man and the supernatural wrath of God.

**Antichrist:** Many believe this will be a western European, perhaps even the Pope, representing a revived (Holy) Roman empire. Others say he will be a Middle Eastern Jew so that Jews will trust him. A recent view is that radical Islam will generate the antichrist spirit, if not the antichrist himself. There have been many other conjectures based on the name being equated with the numbers 666.

**Mark of the Beast:** Christ provides a stark warning in Revelation that believers are not to take the mark of the beast, which is given in the forehead or right hand, and allows one to buy and sell. The most common interpretation of this is an international identification system

that would put a chip or indelible mark of some kind on a person's body. This would then be scanned when you try to conduct a business transaction, such as buying food or depositing money in an account. Without this mark of loyalty to the antichrist, you would not be able to participate in the world's economy. This view is dramatically depicted in the popular Left Behind series. The books even envision a supernatural mark for believers that is visible only to other believers, thus allowing them to know whom they can trust during the times of trials. Of course, there are others who interpret the mark of the beast in a symbolic or figurative sense, perhaps being at most a loyalty oath, which would provide a clear indication whether the person has accepted Christ as their savior. This view does not expect a physical mark in one's body.

Babylon: This is a great example of the diversity of interpretation of end times scriptures. Babylon is mentioned in the Bible more times than any other city besides Jerusalem. It has been taken to mean the literal city (currently a village named Hillel), an economic system, a religious system, Rome, a modern city of commerce such as New York or London, and so on. Again, there is good textual support for each of these interpretations.

The point of the variety of interpretations is that we need to be open to fulfillment in any of these ways, or perhaps something else that is completely unexpected. In particular, we need to be careful about holding on to an interpretation that is very restrictive. An example might be holding that Babylon or the Jerusalem temple must be literally rebuilt before the tribulation can begin. While this could be the proper interpretation, and we certainly should be open to it, if we insist on such a scenario, then we could be in the unfortunate position of saying that the tribulation cannot be upon us because Babylon or the temple has not been rebuilt, when there might be much evidence to the contrary.

As a personal example of the dangers in narrow interpretations, many years ago, as I was meditating on end times issues, I decided to ask a very specific question of the Lord. I simply said, "Where will the antichrist come from?" I was completely taken off guard when I immediately received a very clear impression - "Russia." I wasn't

expecting a specific answer, so at first I thought this was quite a revelation. However, as I pondered my information, the Holy Spirit brought to my mind that the scriptures said Jesus would be from Bethlehem, from Nazareth, and from Egypt. These were places where he was born, raised, and spent a few years in hiding with his family. Similarly, the antichrist “being from Russia” could mean almost anything. In fact, it could be a source of deception if I were to make this a criteria, and say that if a world figure was not born in Russia, then he could not be the antichrist. The appropriate way to use this information is to see if a particular candidate for antichrist has Russia somewhere in his background. This, along with many other scriptural clues, could help to confirm his identity.

As I mentioned earlier, I subscribe to the futurist view that most of end times prophecy is yet to be fulfilled. I would now like to deal with the non-futurist views. One is the idealist view, also associated with amillennialism, which states that there is not a literal millennial reign of Christ on earth, but rather that Christians are currently reigning with Christ in a figurative sense as we strive to bring about justice and righteousness in the world. While this approach to interpretation can be very helpful in emphasizing the Christian’s ongoing duty to live righteously, the limitation is that it entirely misses the message of judgment and any opportunity for preparation and understanding of specific prophetic fulfillment. If, in fact, end times Bible passages are prophetic, as they claim internally, then this figurative view can lead the idealists astray to the point that they find themselves unprepared for end times events. Christ repeatedly warns against being unprepared at his coming.

The other non-futurist approach is the preterist (and historicist) view, which holds that most of Revelation was fulfilled in the first century (and succeeding centuries), and that many prophetic details relate to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. This view leads to postmillennialism, which says we are currently awaiting the final return of Christ, which occurs at the end of a non-literal millennium that began with the destruction of Jerusalem, the dispersion of the Jews, and the ascendance of the Church Age. There are some extreme preterists who

even believe that Christ's second coming occurred after the fall of Jerusalem, and that the Church is in the final Kingdom period, working towards complete dominion over the world.

As we move further in time from Israel becoming a nation, and the rapture and antichrist seem even further away to many Christians, the preterist view is gaining in popularity. It is particularly appealing to serious, literal, Bible students because of the many scriptures that indicate a "soon" second coming of Christ, which would accompany the destruction of Jerusalem within a generation. Also, one can find many first century detailed events both literally and figuratively described in prophetic passages. Searching out and understanding these past fulfillments can provide a realistic picture of how prophecy can be fulfilled in the future.

Although this interpretation differs significantly from the idealist, the end result is the same in terms of denying a future end times period. This results in the belief that we are to lead a righteous life, without needing to prepare for a rapture or a tribulation period followed by a supernatural reign with Christ on earth. This view also completely ignores the role of the Jewish race and nation of Israel in prophecy by declaring that the Church is now spiritual Israel, and there is no longer Jew or Gentile.

Again, many scriptures can be interpreted to support this view, but I believe that adhering to it alone clearly violates other scriptures and the spirit of God's word, which repeatedly points to the ultimate redemption of a remnant of the Jewish race and national Israel. To spiritualize and replace this with the Church is to ignore thousands of years of history and the supernatural events of the last century. This is an example of strict interpretations based on man's understanding of the "letter" of the law while denying the intent of the Holy Spirit, the infinite richness of God's word, and his ultimate redemptive purpose in history.

# 4

## THESIS FOUR

“We should become knowledgeable about all end times prophetic passages.”

**S**o, the three theses so far tell us that it is not necessary to hold to a single interpretation of end times prophecies, that to do so invites deception, but that we should nevertheless become familiar with various interpretations so that we can remain flexible. The fourth thesis extends our foundation by saying that we should become knowledgeable about all end times prophetic passages.

You might think, like the so-called “pan-tribber,” “why should I worry about the details? I’ll just wait and see how it all pans out.” In a sense, I am suggesting such a posture. However, the details are important, and we need to be much more alert than this “pan-trib” attitude implies. In Matthew 24 Christ tells his disciples to watch out, meaning to be alert and not sleepy. In many other parables and situations he emphasizes this watchfulness. However, it’s not just a matter of staying awake, but also of knowing what to expect. To do this, we must know the Bible passages that could be applicable to end times, since we know that the Spirit of truth will tell us what is yet to come (John 16:13), and that, even though he is sovereign, God does nothing that he hasn’t revealed through the prophets (Amos 3:7). Also, Christ and the New Testament writers constantly refer to scripture to confirm their pronouncements. As we navigate through these exciting times, we must be able to do the same.

A great illustration of this is found in the last few books of the Left Behind series. Many of the characters make extensive references to, or actually speak, Biblical passages as events are transpiring. It's almost as though God's written word is causing the events to happen. We certainly should respect such powerful words with awe and careful study.

So how do we become familiar with end times passages and, just as importantly, how should we handle these mysterious words? One of the early studies that had the most impact on me was to determine why the Jews of Christ's time missed it, in spite of their great knowledge of the Scriptures. To answer this question, I looked at examples in the Gospels and Acts where an Old Testament prophetic passage is referenced as being fulfilled by some event in Christ's life, or in the acts of the early Church. There are over thirty such examples in the Gospels. When you go back to the Old Testament references and examine the context, you will be surprised at how often the fulfillment is not at all obvious. You will begin to understand why the contemporaries of Christ missed it.

Many times the context is about a conquering deliverer, so no wonder they were expecting Christ to fulfill all these prophecies at his first coming. There are several such passages that were only partially fulfilled, leaving us to await his second coming for the final fulfillment.

Other passages seem to be taken out of context altogether. You would not have ever guessed, looking forward, that such passages would have referred to the Messiah. It was only as the information was needed that the references could have become relevant. For example, the Jews did not know of any passages that indicated the Messiah would come from Galilee, yet Isaiah 9 contains a somewhat veiled reference that could later be applied without any difficulty. However, even then the Jews missed it. In this case, another factor was at work. Because Galilee was an area of low social status, the Jews simply were not open to interpreting this scripture as a reference to the Messiah.

So we must be very careful not to repeat this mistake and let our preconceived ideas determine what we are willing to receive from prophetic scripture. Jesus used parables so that only those who had

open hearts would understand what he was saying. His letters to the Churches in Revelation 2 and 3 also are meant for those who have “ears to hear what the Spirit is saying.”

We also learn from this study that we need to examine the whole word of God, not just the popular passages that obviously deal with end times. Who knows what other obscure passages or isolated verses will have a mysterious fulfillment that we should be able to discern. One example might be the reference in Zechariah 11:17 to a person with a withered arm and blinded right eye. This could very well relate to the fatal injury from which antichrist recovers. Hitler may have been a shadow of this personage, with the injury he suffered from an assassination attempt.

So, to ensure that we cover the important end times prophetic passages, I would recommend regular verse-by-verse reading and study of the following:

***The Major and Minor Prophets***

Isaiah 2, 11, 13, 14, 19, 24-27, 61-66  
Ezekiel 34-42  
Daniel 2, 7-12  
Zechariah

***Psalms***

These heart cries to God during periods of great rejoicing and great trials may be just what the Church needs during end times difficulties and victories.

***New Testament Gospels***

Matthew 24 & 25  
Mark 13  
Luke 12, 17 & 21 (which contain Jesus' description of end times and the warning to watch and be ready)

***Paul's Epistles***

I Corinthians 15

I Thessalonians 4

II Thessalonians 1 & 2

II Peter 3 (in which the apostles reveal and discuss several key issues of the second coming)

***Revelation***

This revelation to the Apostle John is the mind-blowing vision of Christ's detailed depiction of end times events and personages.

I also encourage you to read commentaries and books on these passages from various sources, especially ones that differ from your own viewpoint. Unfortunately, you will not find very many sources that offer a wide variety of interpretations. And those few that do present alternative interpretations typically do so in a negative light to demonstrate the superiority of the view they espouse. This simply confirms my earlier point that most authors feel they have to pick a particular interpretation to avoid the appearance of uncertainty or confusion.

# 5

## THESIS FIVE

“We must prepare our minds and hearts to handle whatever comes during end times.”

**W**e can summarize the first four theses by saying that we must be knowledgeable and yet flexible about interpreting end times prophecy. Then we are ready for the fifth and last thesis, which says that we must prepare our minds and hearts to handle whatever comes during end times.

Most of what we have discussed so far involves having a somewhat passive posture. We must accumulate knowledge and have the right mind-set about prophetic Bible passages. But this is not enough. If we are going to participate in an event, such as an athletic competition, a camping trip, or childbirth, we need to do more than just have the appropriate knowledge and an open attitude. To really be successful, and not let surprises overwhelm us, we need to prepare in a number of additional, more proactive ways. For example, we need to seek godly advice from others who have experience or special insight into the situation. We also need to learn and practice specific skills that will be needed, including how to react to simulated and real-life events. Finally, we need to be very aware of what is happening and discern the true nature of events and personages so that we know what to do as events begin to unfold.

One of the best analogies is that of childbirth. My wife has had four children. Each birth was a very different and challenging experience. From these, she has gained considerable insight into what Jesus meant when he compared end times signs to the beginning of birth pains in Matthew 24:8. In the face of overwhelming pressure, she learned, even though you know there is a reward at the end, your body wants out. It's like a storm that comes upon you with unexpected force. Part of you wants to escape, and part of you wants to fight. If you are not prepared, you will most likely be caught up in fear and perhaps even be damaged by the experience.

However, if you have prepared, even though you may be surprised by the magnitude of the event and the direction things take, you will be able to listen to your coach instead of your own body. You will be able to focus and breathe through it. The simulations in labor classes, and even Braxton Hicks contractions, are opportunities to prepare by practicing how to listen to the voice that will help you get through the real thing.

As with birth pains, preparing for end times involves acquiring knowledge, understanding how to use that knowledge, and practicing it in real and simulated situations. However, you can only do this by hearing the Coach's voice, i.e., the Holy Spirit, for only He will guide you into all truth and show you things to come (John 16:13) and tell you this is the way, walk to the right or the left.

So let's look at some of the ways to prepare for end times. The first is to pray and seek advice from people to whom God leads you. Pray about what books to read, what conferences to attend, what web sites to explore, etc. In addition to these valuable resources, I suggest you seek out people of godly character who have a track record of an accurate prophetic ministry and who deal with end times issues in their prophecies. These are people who claim to receive supernatural messages through the Holy Spirit in the form of words, visions, dreams, impressions, etc., that are in line with the Bible and have been tested by multiple church leaders. This is the ministry of the prophet and the gift of prophecy mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12.

I have examined a number of these prophets and their messages. While their styles, language, and emphases differ widely, I have been surprised at the similarity of the key messages. Some of it is very hard to hear, such as the nature and degree of persecution and devastation that is coming on the world. However, there is also a common theme of God's saints being victorious throughout all the trials.

Of course, many people have significant issues with these prophetic messages. For example, on a surface level some of them seem to contradict others. Also, it is likely that none of these prophets have been 100% accurate in the past. Or, they may have been accurate and prolific, but they have had ethical or moral failures. And of course, many non-charismatic/Pentecostal believers do not even recognize the legitimacy of such modern-day prophecy, claiming that the Bible is the only authoritative source of prophetic words.

Regardless of the negatives, and in keeping with the principle of remaining open to how our sovereign Lord wants to work, I think we need to consider the possibility that such prophetic messages are meant to provide us guidance, comfort, knowledge, and strength during difficult times. Certainly there are counterfeit prophets, as Jesus warned. But this puts all the more importance on discerning the true ones. The ultimate test will come as events unfold, and we begin to see which prophets are accurate and which may be ignored. Then, as we see what is true, we must take their prophetic messages seriously and determine what our response and preparations need to be as we are individually led by the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, I believe we need to explore, assess, and incorporate such prophetic messages to the degree that we can determine them to be from tested, reliable sources. I think it is worth the risk that some of these might not be 100% accurate as they have been recorded. We certainly do not have the benefit of thousands of years of validation as we do with the canonical Bible prophets. And we can never be certain that contemporary messages do not have some degree of personal bias intentionally or unintentionally inserted. However, in this age of pervasive media and instant communications, we do have the

advantage of wide, rapid peer review. Some of the more reliable prophetic ministries even subject their words to a peer review process before they are published.

Let's look at two prophetic themes to illustrate how they might influence our actions in end times.

One common theme from prophets who deal with end times relates to attacks upon America. These attacks typically come from Russia and perhaps China, and may be in concert with Islamic terrorist activities. In some cases they even involve limited nuclear exchanges on American coasts. The common thread, though, is that such attacks on American soil, and the resulting economic chaos, are judgment for America's sins, but that God's people will be supernaturally protected and provided for during these times, particularly in designated cities of refuge. These overcoming saints, in spite of great persecution, will help lead a revival that comes as a result of America realizing and repenting for her sins.

Another common theme that may appear to contradict this comes from prophets who see a world revival that has already begun in parts of Africa, South America, and China. This will spread as God's people appropriate by faith the supernatural gifts that are already available through Christ's work on the cross. This movement will transcend church and denominational boundaries, will be accomplished by lay people in the marketplace, and will result in radical expressions of praise and devotion to God, such as non-stop worship and prayer in stadiums, and will be accompanied by miraculous healings, signs and wonders. Typically, the prophets of this movement do not deal with other end times events. Their focus is on seeing God's will in heaven being worked out on earth, culminating in a great harvest of souls.

As an example of being flexible and of the value of imagining how things could happen, I would like to propose a simple scenario that could encompass both of these dynamic prophetic themes. I am not saying this is what will happen. I'm just giving an example of how God could fulfill apparently incongruous prophecies in a creative way, just as he did with Christ's first coming.

So here it is in a nutshell, from America's perspective:

1. Islamic terrorism occurs in America and is blamed on Christians supporting Israel; these Christians are persecuted for bringing on this extremist danger.
2. Fear of terrorism weakens the economy and further divides the American people politically and religiously.
3. America's growing weakness invites more terrorist pressure, ultimately resulting in limited invasion and nuclear attacks from the terrorists and their opportunistic supporters in Russia and China.
4. Strong, prepared Christians, in spite of an antagonistic American government, will lead a national revival; supernatural prayer and warfare will miraculously defeat the invaders; the same supernatural forces will support Israel against an attack by Muslim nations led by antichrist.

This simple scenario combines the Biblical picture of the persecuted yet overcoming tribulation saints, and shows their role in interceding for Israel's supernatural deliverance. This is just one example of how God could combine what appear to be contradictory views into a surprising series of events. He certainly did so at Christ's first coming.

This sample scenario also shows that while we in America have been focused on the Middle East as the place where end times will play out, we could very well see significant impacts in our own country, and we may have an important role to play as a nation. However, we should also be knowledgeable about the Middle East peoples, religions, and events, since they will most certainly influence much of what happens in the rest of the world during end times.

One of the real challenges of Christians is to know how to react to political, cultural, military, and socio-economic events. This not only

heightens our awareness of end times related events, but it also gives us a chance to develop and practice godly responses as well as to pray and intercede appropriately. When confronted with a particular issue, we must somehow be able to rise above traditional partisan rhetoric and instead see what God is doing and react with grace and wisdom that reflects His perspective.

For example, do we support the government of Israel, no matter what? How do we know when to support intervention in another country's affairs, and when do we back off and depend on divine intervention? How should we pray for our own president and other government leaders? If we are truly in end times, does it really matter what happens politically and economically as long as the Gospel is being spread to more people around the world and the Body of Christ is growing stronger?

There were many times in Israel's history when God, through his prophets, gave guidance to the leaders and people that was contrary to the conventional wisdom. We need to learn from these examples and be ready to listen to the Holy Spirit and modern day prophets so we will know what's coming, how to prepare our hearts, and how to react as events transpire. If the Body is to be in unity in end times, then I believe we will receive consistent, unified messages through these anointed sources. But we must be in tune with the Holy Spirit, and we must test and identify reliable prophets.

I don't believe the Body of Christ is in this position of unity today, at least not in America. We undoubtedly need to be more desperate to hear from God. This can come from within our own spirits, or it can be motivated by external pressures. Most likely it will be a combination. The best biblical example of being in the right position is that of Simeon and Anna in Luke 2. They were both going about God's business, being completely open to God's still small voice in their spirits, fasting and praying in his house, and hungry to know when the Christ was to appear. Then the Christ did come, in a most miraculous and surprising way...



## Q&A

**N**ow for Q & A. But in the spirit of breaking paradigms, I want to reverse the process. I am going to ask the questions, and I want you to answer.

Here's my first question: (Use the spaces below to write your answers.)

***In what areas of end times interpretation are you NOT willing to allow some flexibility?***

Have one or two such areas in your mind. It might be a rapture position, the general identity of antichrist, the interpretation of Babylon, or the irrelevance of modern-day prophets, for example.

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When you answer, here are two follow-on questions.

1. ***What would be the downside of allowing flexibility in that area?***

In other words, what harm would be done in admitting that other positions could possibly be what actually takes place?

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2. ***What would be the downside if your inflexible position turned out to be wrong?***

In other words, what harm could be done if everyone believed in your position, and then it turned out that some other scenario actually takes place?

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