

What Difference Does It Make How Christians View Prophecy?

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The study of prophecy is vital towards the discovery of the divine will in history. "The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Rev 19:10). It is remarkable that Peter, after describing the tangible proof of his own sensory experience of the transfiguration ("eyewitnesses of His majesty"), could speak of the written prophetic scripture ("the prophecy that came in old time" v 21) as "a more sure word."

"And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with him in the holy mount. We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts?" (2Pet 1:18-19).

It is always to "the words that were spoken before by the holy prophets" that the apostles constantly and invariably appeal to verify their witness of things fulfilled and things to come.

"This second epistle, beloved, I now write unto you; in both which I stir up your pure minds by way of remembrance: that ye may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets?" (2Pet 3:1-2).

Only so far as the testimony of Jesus could be shown to conform to "what Moses and the prophets did say should come" (Acts 26:22) could it be commended to the people of the book as the promised "hope of Israel" (Acts 28:20). No other witness could be considered viable since Isaiah had said "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isa 8:20). This authority alone constituted for the early church the final court of appeal. All other kinds of evidence were considered secondary and contingent on their agreement with this standard (canon). The witness of prophecy was the basis of all apostolic proclamation, persuasion, and defense. Prophecy is God's own chosen proof of His existence and character (see Isa 41:21-23; 42:9; 43:9; 44:7, 26, 28; 45:4, 11; 46:10).

Prophecy, The Knowledge of God, and Worship

The authenticity of our worship can rise no higher than our knowledge of God. Of course, in scripture, "the knowledge of God" speaks first of relationship, but such relationship is predicated on the Holy Spirit's revelation of the truth. If God is to be worshipped "in Spirit and in truth," and if "no lie is of the truth," it behooves us "to study to show ourselves approved unto God, rightly dividing the word of truth" (2Tim 2:15), in the faith that "all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable?" (2Tim 3:16).

We are instructed to "cast down every imagination" that threatens to dim or compromise the *true and ultimate glory of God* by any lesser glory. Believers are to "always be prepared to make a defense" (1Pet 3:15 RSV). Paul spoke of the "form of sound words" (2Tim 1:15), and the "form of doctrine" (Ro 6:17). The defense of the faith, for which Paul was "set" (Phil 1:17), entails defense of its "form." There is a specific form of glory that is at risk of loss or distortion if the intent of the scripture is misappropriated. Error in prophetic truth can exact a serious toll in such things as vigilance, foresight, and the heart's preparation for patient endurance. But most importantly, it is the display of the wisdom and glory of God's sovereign purpose, action, and vindication in history that is ultimately at stake in our view of prophecy.

Removal 'From,' or Preservation 'Through' Tribulation?

What is the divine intention for the church of this dispensation? If judgment begins at the house of God, then to what does this judgement extend? Is the church's eschatological calling complete? Or, does God intend a full reflection of His image in the church of the last time, even especially out of extremity, weakness, and reproach? Jesus asks the question: "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth? What kind of faith will survive unparalleled apostasy (2Thes 2:3)? What, or what manner of time is signified concerning an overcoming remnant that "loved not their lives unto the death (Rev 12:11; Dan 11:32-35)? Is there a scriptural basis for the hope that the church will come into such fullness sufficient to provoke Israel to jealousy? Does the scripture anticipate a last days martyr witness through a church that exhibits the power of a kingdom that is now once more at hand (Re 12:10)? Seeing that tribulation has an undoubted role in the history of the church, and in the life of every believer (Acts 14:22), may we not expect a future period of universal persecution (Rev 6:10-11) to play an even greater role in effecting an eschatological fullness?

If Israel will know the fullness of the Spirit in the millennium¹, is it not reasonable to expect that God intends to show the first fruits of that fullness in the church, and so 'move Israel to jealousy, not only in the first century, but especially in the last hour of Jacob's trouble (Dan.11:32-35)? It is impossible to conceive that God intends less than a demonstration of resurrection power and glory through the church in a final testimony of obedience unto death (see Rev. 6:11; Acts 14:22; 1Thess.3:4; Rev.1:9). Who will deny that tribulation does not enlarge the believer's capacity for hope and glory? Consider the following points:

Things accomplished in the fires of testing:

1. To purify and refine (Dan.11:35; 12:10).

¹If we look ahead to the millennial blessedness of the restored Jewish race, we see history's greatest monument to electing grace. It is the vision of a miracle people, still in mortal bodies, dwelling in uninterrupted health and prosperity (Isa.33:24) for one thousand years without a single incident of defection from the covenant in all of their generations (Ro.11:26-29 with Isa.59:20-21; 4:3; 60:21; 62:12;; 54:10,13; Jer.31:34; 32:37-40 etc. et al).

2. To enlarge capacity for endurance, love, obedience, and final glory (Ro.5:3,4).
3. To demonstrate the power of the resurrection to the heavenlies through testing and weakness.
4. To displace through obedient submission unto death, the usurping rule of the fallen host of principalities and powers.
5. To make Israel jealous through the church's ultimate self sacrifice in a final prophetic testimony that will penetrate the veil over the Jewish heart, and make known the mystery of Christ and of Israel.²

So then, is it preservation in the midst (Rev. 3:10, 12:14), or removal from the presence of trial? Manifestly, it is both; but characteristically, it is the former before the latter. Only this order is calculated to at once test the heart and reveal the power and glory of God. If this is the normative order in all of God's dealings, shouldn't it suggest that God would first demonstrate his power in and through tribulation before he removes the church from its presence? Shall the church of the manifold wisdom and glory of God be exempted from the ultimate test that ushers in the revelation of the ultimate glory?

When the principles of personal refinement are extended to the larger scale of an eschatological purpose, it suggests the logic of the church's perfection (fullness) through tribulation (see Acts 14:22 with Dan. 11:32-35, 12: 9-10). Indeed, if this is an accurate summary of the divine pattern, the concept of removal is tantamount to an abortion of the wisdom and intent of 'Zion's travail.'³

Tribulation, tempered by the Spirit of truth, acts as a birthing channel into the transcendent power of resurrection life and grace, manifesting through weakness the powers of the age to come. Even Jesus learned obedience '*through*,' (and not around), the things He suffered. The

²Israel is waiting to see the glory of the departed Shekinah resting on a church that 'loves not its life unto death'. Indeed, what is to be the cost of the church's mercy toward the natural branches?

³The travail of the heavenly Zion (the church) precipitates the travail of the earthly Zion (natural Jerusalem) prefatory to the kingdom; (see Gal. 4:26; Heb. 12:22-23; Rev. 21; Rev. 12:2; with Isa. 66:8-10; Jer. 30:6-7; Dan. 12:1,2).

end of human power in crises makes place for the revelation of the power of the resurrection in grace and glory (see Dan. 12: 7, with Deut. 32:36) "Crises reveals, and ultimate crises reveals ultimately" (Arthur Katz).

The whole of scripture is a continual theology of resurrection and triumph over the mundane elements of the fallen order. This is "the faith and patience of the saints." The great tribulation period will be the church's finest hour of faith and testimony before earth and heaven (Dan.11:32-35; 12:9-10; Rev. 6:10-11 with 12:11). Therefore with Paul, we say "Let no man deceive you by any means: *for that day shall not come*, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed." (2Thes.2:3), and with Jesus, "Take heed that no man deceive you." (Jesus; Mt.24:4). Why such urgency? What is the cost of deception concerning this matter? May we propose that it is the open vindication of God in history that is at issue, and the powers know it (Rev. 12:12). It will mean the glory and vindication of God through His church (Eph. 3:10) and through Israel (Rom. 11: 23-32) in the sight of all nations (Rev. 1:7, 10:7, Ezk. 39: 21-23). The final trouble (Mt. 24: 21, Jer. 30:7, Dan 12:1) is intended to press and display the great issues of the faith. It is the time of God's ultimate contention with Israel, the church, the nations, and the powers of the air. It is the time that the mystery of iniquity is revealed (2 Thes. 2:6-8), and the stakes could not be higher.

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