

Study Aids

For “What’s the Message?” Lessons
Interpretive Principles – Part One

Lesson 66

Comment:

This Study Aid is the first of two parts intended to help you better understand the role and purpose of the prophets, and some basic rules in interpreting prophecy. These points are excerpts from the book, **Prophecy Interpreted** by Dr. John P. Milton, published by Augsburg Publishing House.

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All too often the emphasis in the study of prophecy is such as to increase rather than allay fear. A wrong use of prophecy can never give to the human heart the faith and the hope and the love that casts out fear. There is in this wrong use of prophecy a mistaken emphasis and a faulty exegesis. The emphasis is wrong because; attention is focused on transient events instead of on the redemptive activity of the living God. The exegesis is wrong because it does not understand the fundamental nature and purpose of prophecy, and therefore ignores basic evangelical principles of interpretation.

1. Historical Contemporariness – know the historical situation.
 - a. The function of the prophet was first of all that of a preacher and teacher of the will of God.
 - b. The message of the prophet reflects and reveals something of the historical situation to which it is directed.
 - c. Under no circumstances have we the right to treat Old Testament prophecies as disjointed parts of an eschatological picture puzzle to be assembled later without regard to historical origin.
2. Covenant Background
 - a. Every prophecy must be interpreted in relation to the covenant of God with men.
 - b. The covenant (with Abraham) is a major theological idea in Biblical religion.
 - c. There is a fundamental relationship between covenant and prophecy.
 - d. The covenant not only presupposes that God is active in human history, but also that there is a purpose with and a goal to His activity.
3. Eschatological Significance
 - a. The predictive element of prophecy looks forward to the future for the fulfillment of God’s purpose, His ultimate goal.
 - b. Prophecy is not predictions to satisfy the curious, not fortune telling.

4. The Shortened Perspective
 - a. In the prophetic message the eschatological goal of the covenant is often seen as coming soon.
 - b. The emphasis is on the promised goal, not on the time when it will be reached.

5. The Fulfillment Greater Than the Prediction
 - a. In saying that the fulfillment is greater than the prediction we mean that it is clearer, that it is more specific in reference, that it has a more definite spiritual emphasis.
 - b. If we stressed the letter of prophecy only, we would never get beyond the acorn.

6. The Unifying Focal Point
 - a. All prophecy has one central focus, and that is God's redemptive purpose and activity in history which heads up in Christ.
 - b. Prophecy is significant only in relation to God's plan of salvation through Jesus the Christ.
 - c. The Incarnation of Jesus is the dividing-line between prophecy and fulfillment.
 - d. The Incarnation puts Old Testament history clearly and definitely into the place of the preliminary and the temporary, whose real meaning and purpose cannot be fully seen apart from its fulfillment in Christ.

The Study Aid of our next lesson will complete these fundamental principles.

Suggested reading for further study:

Although Dr. Milton's book may be out of print, you may still be able to find one through Amazon.com, or other booksellers. It is not a large book, only 138 pages long and easy to read, and will put these summary points into a fuller context.