

Unfulfilled Prophecy

by J.C. Philpot

J.C. Philpot explores the complexities and spiritual significance of unfulfilled prophecy, emphasizing the need for personal experience and careful interpretation.

Scripture: 1 Peter 1:10, Revelation 1:1, Revelation 22:7

Topics: "Biblical Prophecy", "Holy Spirit"

Description

J.C. Philpot addresses the prejudice against unfulfilled prophecy, cautioning against substituting speculative knowledge for the teachings of the Holy Spirit. He acknowledges the complexity of interpreting the book of Revelation due to its symbolic nature and emphasizes the importance of balancing the literal and spiritual meanings. Philpot encourages believers to seek understanding in prophecy, trusting in God's ability to reveal the truth in His timing, similar to how the Old Testament saints awaited the fulfillment of prophecies about Christ's first coming.

Transcript

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There is, we know, in the mind of many experimental preachers and writers a prejudice against the whole subject of unfulfilled prophecy. The cause of this is not difficult to ascertain. They have seen how many notional professors have made a little smattering of unfulfilled prophecy and a letter faith in the latter-day glory a substitute for the teachings of the Blessed Spirit in the soul. They have also seen how ministers who once promised well have been drawn aside by the study of prophecy from the line of vital experience into dead and dry speculations, and instead of feeding the church of God with what they themselves have felt, tasted, and handled of the word of life, set before them the fruit only of their studious brain, which indeed may inform the judgment but only starves the soul.

They feel also that the choice of the flock, the most tried and tempted, as well as the most blessed and favored of the living family, especially the poor in this world's goods, are willingly strangers to this speculative knowledge, and have proved and are daily proving that there is nothing in it to bless their souls, comfort their hearts, subdue their sins, deliver them out of temptation, break to pieces their snares, or make Christ precious. All this we see and feel, and have seen and felt for years, and can sincerely and honestly say that the study of unfulfilled prophecy in the bare letter, as distinct from the sweet vein of

spiritual experience hidden in it--which, by the by, these professors never see--has never communicated a grain of divine comfort to our heart, and has never been made the least blessing to our soul in a way of sensible communication.

We do not say that it has not been blessed to others. There are those whom we believe to be children of God who have told us that they have found the subject truly profitable to them, and have felt their hearts stirred up, and their affections sensibly loosened from the things of time and sense, by anticipating the near approach of Christ's Second Coming. Thus, others may have found a blessing in it which we may not. But we must acknowledge that we have taken and still do take much interest in it; and this may be the case with others of our readers. It must be acknowledged that there are many subjects of interest to the church of God apart from personal experience. That is indeed the grand point, the indispensable thing, without which all knowledge is speculative, barren, and worthless; but we may be allowed sometimes to look out of our own immediate circle of individual experience and cast a glance at the hopes and expectations of the church. These things do not clash. In the same way as members of a gospel church, besides their own personal sorrows and joys, are called upon and sometimes are enabled to "weep with them that weep, and rejoice with them that do rejoice," who are bound up in the bond of Christian fellowship with themselves, so may the members of Christ's mystical body sorrow and rejoice with the sufferings and hopes of the church at large.

No book in the whole compass of the sacred volume is confessedly so difficult of interpretation as the Revelation of John. This difficulty arises not only from the very nature of the subject, unfulfilled prophecy being necessarily obscure until its accomplishment, but from the symbolical form under which the predictions in it are couched. In these symbols there is this striking peculiarity, that while viewed spiritually they are most simple and expressive, they are, viewed literally, (that is, with respect to their historical fulfillment,) most difficult and obscure. Take, for instance, the pouring out of the vials of the wrath of God upon the earth. (Rev. 16.) What more simple or expressive figure could there be of the righteous anger of Jehovah, treasured up, as it were, until the iniquities of the world called it down? But when we come to adapt these distinct vials to historical events, and attempt to determine at what period they were successively poured out, and what is their strict, literal accomplishment, then the difficulty commences, and what, experimentally viewed, is most plain and instructive, prophetically viewed is most obscure and uncertain.

The objection, then, immediately arises, "Why attempt an explanation of what, according to your own admission, is so obscure? Would it not be better wholly to abstain from examining so perplexing and uncertain a subject? As the spiritual meaning is so simple and plain, so filled with holy wisdom, so edifying and instructive, so pregnant with encouragement and consolation, blended at the same time with such solemn warning and admonition, would it not be far better to confine yourself to what is so experimental and profitable, and not puzzle and perplex yourself and us with what is so dark and difficult?" We admit the force of the argument, as is evident from the way in which we have stated it; but may we not have both? Preserving to its fullest degree the spiritual, may we not also give a glance at the literal interpretation? Is this forbidden by the blessed Spirit? Does he forewarn us against approaching this holy ground, if at least, like Moses, we put off the shoes of carnal reason from off our feet?

How does the sacred record open? "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to show unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John. Blessed is he who reads, and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein; for the time is at hand." If God gave the revelation to Jesus Christ, "to

show unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass," why should not his servants attempt to understand the things shown to them? And if there be a blessing promised on those who read and hear the words of the prophecy, why should we not seek to obtain a manifested interest in such a promise? Besides the spiritual meaning, there is evidently a prophetic one; and it is equally evident that this prophetic meaning was given for the church to read, study, and profit by. If, then, we keep this literal meaning in its proper place, subsidiary and subordinate to the experimental interpretation, there seems to be no scriptural reason against examining it. But, if it be again objected, that the difficulty of the interpretation must always form an insuperable barrier, may we not reply, that the same ever-blessed Jesus who gave it to John for the express benefit of his church and people can unfold its meaning to our understanding, as well as apply its promises with power to our hearts? But while we speak thus, we at the same time feel so much both the difficulty of the subject and our own incapacity properly to handle it, that it has all but deterred us even from making the attempt; and we therefore trust our readers will bear with us if we come short in laying it open to their satisfaction.

The inherent difficulty of the book has almost necessarily produced a proportionate variety of interpretation. Two striking instances may be adduced to show this. There are interpreters who assert that the whole of the Revelation has been already fulfilled, and that the first three or four centuries of the Christian church witnessed its entire accomplishment;* and there are those who say that no part has been yet accomplished beyond the first three chapters, and that the whole still remains in the dim and distant future.† We cannot subscribe to either of these views, and hardly know which is the more inconsistent or untenable. If the first opinion were true, it would be the strongest argument which an infidel could urge against the inspiration of the book; for the grand evidence of a prophecy being inspired is its undeniable accomplishment. And if the second view were well founded, not only would the church of God have been left uncared for and unnoticed in the sacred chart of prophecy for above 1,700 years, but it would falsify the positive declaration, which we have already quoted, as standing on the very threshold of the book, that the things predicted were "shortly to come to pass." In opposition to these strained and inconsistent opinions, we believe, in common with most interpreters, that much, if not by far the greater part, has been already fulfilled, that an important part is now being accomplished under our eyes, and that the day is fast approaching when there will sound the "great voice out of the temple of heaven, from the throne, saying, It is done!"

There are certain truths of divine revelation which to an enlightened understanding are beyond all dispute or controversy; and on these points, as they are usually of vital, fundamental importance, a preacher or a writer who seeks to edify the church of God cannot express himself too clearly or insist too strongly. But there are other truths which, either because less plainly revealed, or because the time for their being fully understood is not yet come, are proportionally obscure and uncertain; and therefore preachers and writers who would reverently treat the oracles of God must either abstain from them altogether, or if they approach them, must handle them with caution and with the utter absence of positiveness and dogmatism. The truths themselves may be as certain, the obscurity not being in them nor in the mode of their revelation, but in our mind, which for various reasons--as natural darkness, want of divine teaching, unbelief, force of prejudice, cleaving to traditional interpretation, rigid discipleship to some master in Israel--is unable to grasp or enter into them. This is particularly the case with the prophetic Scriptures--which, besides the difficulty which arises out of their symbolical language, must almost necessarily be obscure until their fulfillment throws upon them its clear and unerring light. When that time arises, their meaning will be so clear that the wonder will be they were not before understood.

To make our meaning more clear, let us for a moment suppose a saint of God under the Old Testament endeavoring to penetrate into the meaning of Isaiah 53. To us who can read it in the light of Messiah's humiliation, sufferings, and death, the meaning is plain and clear, and we see the Man of sorrows portrayed in every line. But that before the coming of Christ its meaning was most obscure to the Old Testament saints is evident from the ignorance of the eunuch who was reading this chapter, and his inquiry of Philip, "I pray you, of whom speaks the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man?"

Now, in the same way as the prophecies which spoke of Christ's first coming were obscure until the Redeemer came as a suffering Jesus, so must the prophecies which treat of his second coming be obscure until he comes as a triumphant Jesus. But, as the prophets and saints of old "searched what or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow," so surely it may be allowable for us in these last times to search the sacred Scriptures, to see what is revealed in them of the second coming of the triumphant Messiah.

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