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Understanding the Prophets (Part 2)



Individual Topics - Steve Gregg

In this discussion, Steve Gregg explores various interpretations of Old Testament prophecies and the challenges of understanding the prophets. He notes that the New Testament writers had special insights into the prophecies that the prophets themselves may not have comprehended. Symbols and metaphors are frequently used in prophetic language, which should be understood metaphorically rather than literally. The discussion also delves into prophecies related to the Messianic Age, which some Christians believe began with the first coming of Jesus Christ and will be consummated at his second coming.

Transcript

Alright, I want to do whatever I can to make it easier for you in the future when you read the prophets to make sense of them and to feel more or less at home in them. And the first principle that needs to be understood and is not necessarily understood or agreed upon by all Christians is that the New Testament is the code breaker. The New Testament is the resource that we have to tell us what the prophets were talking about.

Now, you might say, well, of course, but not all find that to be equally so. In fact, this is one of the, if I would list four or five primary differences between dispensationalism and let's just say, amillennialism. One of those differences would be this, that the amillennial view holds that the New Testament interprets the Old.

The dispensational view holds that the Old Testament interprets the New. Now, what I mean by that is, according to the dispensational view, which is what you're going to hear more often than not when you're hearing people teach on the prophets, the Old Testament provided the basic predictive structure for what to expect in the rest of history. And when God says he's going to do certain things for Israel and for Jerusalem and so forth, those have to be taken pretty much literally because the Jews would have taken them literally.

And because they took them literally, God wouldn't deceive them, of course, so he must have intended them to be taken literally. And then when we read the New Testament,

even though the New Testament doesn't affirm any of those things, that is, it doesn't affirm that God's ever got a future for Israel or Jerusalem or anything like that, yet we have to assume that the New Testament writers believed that, and that we have to import that into their own theology, their own eschatology, because that was in the Old Testament. Therefore, the Old Testament becomes the controlling factor for understanding the New Testament.

You import, by assumption, into the New Testament ideas that the Jews would have had from reading the Old. Now, this hermeneutic principle is one of the main reasons why dispensationalists and non-millennials have different understandings of eschatology, because the dispensationalist believes you use the Old Testament as your primary authority on eschatology, and whatever the New Testament says has to fit in somehow with what the Old Testament says. Whereas, historically, Christians have taught that the Old Testament prophets were not well understood by the Jews, and that the New Testament writers understood them correctly.

Therefore, when the New Testament writers quote the Old Testament and give it a certain meaning, they are seeing what the Old Testament really meant, although the Jews may not have, for the most part, recognized this. Now, it seems to me biblically that this position is unavoidable. If you look at 1 Peter 1, Peter indicates that even the prophets themselves, to say nothing of their listeners, did not understand their own prophecies very well.

1 Peter 1, verses 10-12 says, of this salvation, he means of ours, of our salvation, the prophets, and he means the Old Testament prophets, have inquired and searched carefully who prophesied of the grace that would come to you. Searching what or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when he testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. To them, that is to the Old Testament prophets, it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us, they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things which angels desire to look into.

Now, that's a lot of unbroken talk. There are not very many punctuation marks in that long section, but if you follow the train of thought, it's basically saying this, the prophets themselves were curious and inquired of God. What was the nature of the prophecies they were talking about? And God revealed to them it was not for them to know, and that it was actually for us to know.

Those of us who have had the gospel preached to us, those who live in the New Testament era, those who have benefited from the preaching of Christ and of the apostles, it's for us to understand what the prophets were saying, because the prophets themselves didn't understand and were not even permitted to. The only example of this

that we can think of in the Old Testament that Peter could be referring to is Daniel. There may have been other cases, but they're not recorded.

And Daniel, in Daniel chapter 12, when he saw these visions, he says, I saw, but I did not understand. And I said, what will the end of these things be? And the angel said, go your way, Daniel. It's sealed up until the time of the end.

Basically, I'm not going to explain it to you because it's not for you to know. And that's what Peter apparently is alluding to here. Prophets wanting to understand more about their own prophecies, but not being given that information and being told it's for a later generation to know.

And Peter said, we're the generation. Christians are the ones who get to know because the apostles have revealed to us. How many times have you read in the New Testament Paul saying, these are the things that were not made known to the sons of men in past generations, but have now been made known to his holy apostles and prophets through the Spirit.

Paul said that essentially four times in his letters. He said it in 1 Corinthians chapter 2. He said it in Ephesians chapter 3. He said it in Colossians, I think, chapter 2, if I'm not mistaken. It might have been chapter 1. And he said it in Romans chapter 16.

Four times he speaks about the truths that were not made known to the sons of men in former times, but were revealed in the New Testament to the holy apostles and prophets. Obviously, the New Testament writers have insights into these things that the Old Testament Jews did not, and even the prophets themselves did not. In 2 Corinthians chapter 3, verse 14, speaking of the Jews who don't know Christ, Paul says, but their minds were blinded.

For until this day, the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. That is, there's a veil over their hearts and their minds. They don't understand.

When the Old Testament is read, they don't understand it. There's this veil between them and the light, and they're unenlightened. He said that veil is taken away in Christ.

When a person turns to Christ, the veil is removed, and then they can understand. But the Jews of the Old Covenant, they couldn't understand any more than the prophets who prophesied could understand. So why would we take their flawed understanding and make that the controlling factor of how we have to interpret the New Testament? It must be the other way around.

The New Testament writers have the insights into it, and we use their insights and read them back into the Old Testament, which is obviously what you do when you have, as it were, a document written in code, and then you have another book that breaks the code.

The New Testament breaks the code. It says in Luke 24, in verse 45, after his resurrection of Jesus, it says, then he opened their understanding.

Meaning the apostles. He opened their understanding that they might comprehend the scriptures. What scriptures? Well, there weren't any scriptures except the Old Testament.

Jesus enlightened his apostles so that they could comprehend the meaning of the scriptures. Now why would that be necessary if the rabbis already had an adequate grasp of it? If an average Jew reading the scriptures, taking them at face value, could comprehend them as they were meant to be comprehended, why give the disciples a special dispensation, a special gift to be able to comprehend the scriptures properly? Because the Jews didn't understand it. The disciples couldn't just go to the rabbis and say, explain this to me, because the rabbis didn't understand it.

The Holy Spirit understood it. It says in 1 Corinthians 2, in verse 4, that the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God. They're foolish as to him because they're spiritually discerned.

The Holy Spirit has to reveal the meaning of spiritual things and the prophets wrote in the Spirit and it takes the Holy Spirit to give the interpretation. That Holy Spirit was given to the apostles and to us and the apostles were given the understanding of the Old Testament scriptures so when they quoted from them, you may have noticed, I don't know if you've ever read that carefully, but if you're a careful reader of the New Testament and you notice when one of the New Testament writers quotes from the Old Testament, you might be one of those people like me who goes back and looks at the Old Testament passage to see how it reads in the context and so forth. I started doing that many, many years ago, decades ago, and it was then that I first discovered that the apostles were a little wacky in the way they applied the Old Testament scriptures.

I mean, they would say, this fulfilled that. I look back in the Old Testament to see what it fulfilled and it doesn't look like that's talking about that at all to me. But then I realized, well, that's just it.

It doesn't mean what the natural man would think it means necessarily. It has to be understood through the Spirit and the apostles were given the Spirit of God and he gave them the understanding of it. Now, frankly, they didn't just have some kind of weird, abstract understanding of the scriptures that no one can make a sense of because they actually saw the whole framework of the scriptures in a different light than the Jews did.

And once you've picked up on that from the New Testament, you can read the Old Testament through that light too and see it just like they did. So, I want to help you with a few things that will maybe get you past some of the greater difficulties. One is to recognize some of the recurring imagery that's not literal in the Old Testament prophets.

That would include anthropomorphisms where things are compared to people and people are compared to other things. Sometimes people are compared to trees and sometimes trees are compared to people. The trees of the field shall clap their hands.

It says in Isaiah 55, 12. Well, that's anthropomorphizing trees to be like people, clapping their hands. And yet sometimes people are called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord.

Or the Assyrian was a cedar in Lebanon, we're told. And there's many places where people are likened to things that aren't people and things that aren't people are likened to people. It's an anthropomorphism when something that isn't a person is likened to a person.

Sometimes likened to animals too, not to people. The kingdom of Babylon is likened to a lion in more than one passage in the Bible. Jeremiah uses that and so does Daniel.

The Medo-Persian empire is likened to a bear in Daniel chapter 7. The Grecian empire is likened to a leopard. And many times in the prophets, the people of God, the Jews, are likened to sheep or goats or bulls or calves or some other animal, always of the clean animal category. And the Gentiles are likened to wolves and bears and lions and things like that, always of the unclean animal category.

The Gentiles are uncircumcised. But not only are they clean and unclean, but they're predator and prey. The Jews are always described as God's flock who are themselves helpless against predators except for the fact that they are under the care of their shepherd.

And the shepherd protects them when he wishes to. But the Gentiles are under no man's control. They're wild animals and they're predatory animals and they're a danger to God's flock.

And you'll find many places, you know, the famous passage about the wolf shall lie down with the lamb and the lion shall lie down with the calf in Isaiah chapter 11, which is also found in Isaiah 65, I think verse 25, same imagery. You know, a lot of people take that very literally, some future millennial age. The trouble is that the passages that they're found in are passages that are quoted from in the New Testament and applied to the church age.

And yet, in the church age, we don't see lions and lambs lying down together, not for very long. Within a very short time, one of them isn't there anymore. They don't make friends.

They might make meals, but they don't make friends. And so how could it be that a passage that seems to talk about the church talks about this phenomenon unless it's using the typical imagery. The predatory animals represent Gentiles.

The domestic animals represent the Jews. The lamb, the calf, the goat, they represent the Jews. The bear, the wolf, the leopard represent the Gentiles.

The two lying down together is like what Ephesians talks about as God taking the hostility between the Jew and the Gentile and breaking down the middle wall that's between them and making of the two one new man, so making peace between them. That's the phenomenon that I think is there. But you wouldn't think of it that way unless you recognize that this kind of imagery is found throughout the scriptures of the prophets.

They're often making these likenesses of the Gentiles to predatory animals and so forth. There's also a lot of agricultural images that are non-literal. In Micah chapter 7, Israel is likened to a vineyard producing grapes, so also in Isaiah chapter 5 and a number of other places.

Well, Israel is not literally a vineyard and the grapes that are being produced actually are something else too. They're spiritual. They represent justice and righteousness according to Isaiah 5, 7. But God often talks about his seeking fruit from his people and the fruit he's seeking is justice and righteousness, the grapes from the vineyard and his people are the vineyard and that kind of imagery comes up a lot in the Old Testament.

Also, I mentioned trees, fruit trees and other kinds of trees, olive trees and olive tree represents Israel in Jeremiah 11, 16. Paul picks up that image in Romans 11 and uses it also of Israel. There's also passages like Isaiah 32, 15 and Isaiah 35, 1 which talk about the desert blossoming and budding and being filled with fruit.

Now, the dispensational teachers I was raised under indicate that's very literal, that in the last days Israel, which has been desert land for many centuries, will be cultivated and will produce a lot of fruit. My pastor used to be proud to say that Israel now supplies a third of the world's citrus fruit, which I guess is true. And he said, see, it fulfills the prophecy that said the desert shall blossom and bud and fill the earth with their fruit.

Well, it might have meant that if it didn't mean something else. The fruit in Isaiah is a reference to the grapes that God was looking for from his vineyard in Isaiah chapter 5, which is justice and righteousness. And the desert represents a fruitless land.

And in talking about the desert producing fruit, it's symbolic. It's talking about the place where God was not producing fruit, largely the Gentiles, will be producing fruit. Remember, Jesus told the Jews, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation that brings forth the fruit of it.

And that was at the end of a parable of a vineyard where the vineyard represented Israel in Matthew chapter 21. But he was using the imagery from the Old Testament prophets. Agricultural images, vineyards, trees, desert transformation, these are all some of the

images you'll find repeated in the Old Testament prophets.

Now also, images of God's wrath are sometimes found in not necessarily literal terms. Fire is a very typical image of God's anger and wrath and judgment, including unquenchable fire. The end of Isaiah talks about the judgment that came upon the Jews, I believe, who rejected Christ and were destroyed in the Holocaust of AD 70.

It talks about them as though their corpses are around and they're subjected to a fire that is not quenched and worms that don't die. The fire that is not quenched, I believe, just represents God's judgment. It's not talking about a literal fire upon them in my understanding of the context or my understanding of the prophets in general.

Jeremiah frequently refers to the Babylonians coming upon Jerusalem as a fire that no man can quench. God says, my wrath is sent out against them as a fire that no man can quench. But he's talking about the Babylonians coming and conquering Jerusalem and taking them in captivity.

That's the fire that no man can quench. God's wrath, God's judgment is used with the images of fire. Sometimes darkness means God's wrath, God's judgment is on a nation.

Sometimes seismic and cosmic disruptions, earthquakes very commonly, mountains melting and so forth, I mentioned earlier. These kinds of things are not literal. They are references to God's judgment and God's wrath.

This is simply a typical way the prophets spoke. There's recurring references to a river and water. Never is it meant literally.

Sometimes, like in Isaiah chapter 10, the invading armies of the Assyrians coming against Judah are likened to a river overflowing its banks. And Judah, the nation, is up to its neck in water. It comes right up to the head, which is Jerusalem.

Jerusalem stayed above water and didn't get conquered by the Assyrians. The rest of Judah did. But it's like an overflowing river, this invasion, these armies coming.

But most of the time, the prophets speak of the river in a form of blessing. Often talking about the river going forth and watering the desert and producing that fruit that we were talking about earlier. But the rivers of water in the prophets are always, when used this way, a reference to the Holy Spirit.

And the fulfillment of them is in the present age, since Pentecost. Remember Jesus said at the Feast of Tabernacles, in John chapter 7, verses 37-39, He said, If anyone thirsts, let him come unto me and drink. And as the Scripture has said, he that believes on me, as the Scripture has said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.

And John said, This he spoke of the Holy Spirit, which was not yet given, because Jesus

was not yet glorified, there in John 7-39. Jesus said, As the Scripture has said, He means the Old Testament Scripture. He that believes on me, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.

Well, there's actually no specific reference in the Old Testament that has that exact statement. You can't find an Old Testament verse that says, out of the believer's belly shall flow rivers of living water. But you can find a number of Old Testament Scriptures that talk about a river, and living water, and watering and so forth.

And John said, This he spoke of the Holy Spirit. Let me just show you quickly a couple of examples or more of this particular thing, because this comes up again and again in the prophets. Joel chapter 3, verse 18.

By the way, many people take this quite literally, but it's meant spiritually, as we'll see. Joel 3, verse 18, It will come to pass in that day that the mountains shall drip with new wine, the hills shall flow with milk, and all the brooks of Judah shall be flooded with water. A fountain shall flow from the house of the Lord to water the valley of the Acacias.

Now, this can't very well be literal, because the house of the Lord is in Jerusalem. Any fountain that flows from there to the valley of the Acacias would have to cross the Jordan River. The valley of the Acacias was in Moab, according to the book of Joshua.

Now, a river can't cross a river. A highway can cross a highway if there's a traffic signal, but a river can't cross a river, and therefore this can't be a literal water thing. And it isn't.

We know because it's mentioned elsewhere. Also, over in Ezekiel, very famously, Ezekiel chapter 47, near the end of that book in the famous Temple Vision, Ezekiel 47, verse 1 says, Then he brought me back to the door of the temple, and there was water flowing from under the threshold of the temple toward the east. For the front of the temple faced the east, and the water was flowing from under the right side of the temple, south of the altar.

And then you'll find that as Ezekiel goes out further from the source, he measures the depth, and it gets deeper and deeper, more and more water as it goes downstream. But this is that same river Joel mentioned, and it's also mentioned in Zechariah chapter 14. And these are the scriptures I believe Jesus was alluding to when he said, As the scripture is said, Out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.

In Zechariah 14, and verse 8, it says, In that day it shall be that living waters shall flow from Jerusalem, half of them toward the eastern sea, half of them toward the western sea. Both summer and winter it shall occur, and the Lord shall be king over all the earth. Now, lots of people take that literally because that's the easiest way to take it, that they know of.

But actually, there's strong evidence in scripture that these are the things that Jesus was

referring to when he talked about, As the scripture is said, the Holy Spirit will flow out from God's people. In Isaiah, I believe it's chapter 32, yeah, he's talking about the same thing, but he makes it clearer what he's talking about. In Isaiah chapter 32, verse 15, he says, Until the Spirit is poured out upon us from on high, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is counted as a forest.

In other places Isaiah talks about rivers of water breaking forth in the desert, and the desert becoming a fruitful field. Here it talks about the Spirit being poured out on high, and the desert becoming a fruitful field. It's obviously talking about spiritual water, spiritual desert, spiritual fruit.

These things are spiritualized. And this imagery is common throughout the prophets. Something I didn't put in your notes, but you'll find also is an imagery of sickness and healing, especially in Isaiah and Jeremiah and Hosea.

Those prophets speak about the nation as being sick and needing to be healed, like a sick man. And of course, the healing they are seeking is spiritual, and the sickness is spiritual also. In some of the passages, the exodus and the gathering of the people from the nations, I mentioned this as a theme.

Sometimes it mentions a highway being there. In Isaiah there's at least half a dozen or more references to this highway that God would build. We know it's not literal, because one of the passages is undisputedly not literally.

In Isaiah 40, where it says, a voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight a highway for our God in the wilderness. Every mountain should be made low, every valley should be exalted, and we're making a highway for our God in the wilderness. Well, that's fulfilled in John the Baptist's ministry.

And the same highway that's talked about there is talked about many times in Isaiah. It's not talking about a literal highway, it's talking about Jesus. Jesus said, I am the way, he's the highway.

And it's called the highway of holiness in Isaiah 35. But these images, a lot of people just take them literally because they don't compare what the New Testament writers said about the meaning of them. And I'm going to, in a moment, turn your attention to the chart that's on the back of your sheet and show you exactly how the New Testament light helps us to understand this kind of stuff.

But I want to point out that as you read through the prophets, in many cases, the longer prophets anyway and some of the shorter ones, are going to follow a pattern for the most part of having certain recurring themes. Generally speaking, they're going to show God's righteousness and his sovereignty. God will be talking about how he did everything right for his people and how he took care of his people.

And he kept his promises to his people, he's been faithful to his people. But then he's going to give his complaint at some point, how the people didn't respond in kind. And he's going to lay out his complaint in more or less detail.

Sometimes he gives a long list of complaints. They're drunkards, they're fornicators, they're idolaters, they're murderers, they're thieves, and he'll have long passages explaining all their sins. Sometimes it's just the fact that they haven't been faithful to the covenant in general.

But the prophets are usually going to lay out what God's complaint is against his people. And what his expectations are in most cases. You know some famous verses about that probably, Micah 6.8, he's shown you, O man, what is good and what does the Lord require of you? But to do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

God always made it very clear what it was he was expecting of them. He says, I desire mercy and not sacrifice. In Hosea chapter 6 and verse 6. So God says, here's what I expect, and his complaint is that he didn't get what he expected.

In Isaiah 5, where Israel is compared to a vineyard, he says, I came looking for grapes, but I found wild grapes that weren't any good. And he explains, I came looking for justice, but I found oppression. I came looking for righteousness, but I heard a cry of the oppressed.

What the prophets are always reminding Israel of is that God had expectations of them and Israel has in no sense lived up to those expectations. And that is God's complaint. Then usually because the complaint has been laid out, God says what he's going to do about it.

And it's usually threatening judgment. Lots of passages in the prophets about judgment. Extended passages, elaborate passages, gruesome passages sometimes.

Because God wants to scare them back into obedience and he calls them to repent. I don't think the prophets ever came after it was too late for anyone to repent. It's true that Jeremiah was told, don't pray for these people anymore because they're not going to come.

But there were some remnant in Jeremiah's day that got saved too. But there's always a call to repent in the prophets. God is saying, this is what's going to happen.

I'm angry at you for these reasons. Here's what I'm going to do about it. Unless of course you repent.

And there's an urgent call to repentance in most of the prophets at least. And when it's not stated, it's often implied. Jonah for example, when he prophesied against Nineveh, he didn't state any call to repentance, but it was clearly implied because the Ninevites

themselves deduced, maybe if we repent this won't happen.

And they were right. They repented and it didn't happen. So there's always at least an implicit call to repentance, often a very explicit call.

Now having laid out all the disasters that he intends to bring upon the people, God then usually says something about the remnant. The remnant are the godly few in Israel at any given time. Sometimes very few.

Sometimes thousands of Israelites. In Elijah's day there were 7,000 who had not bowed the knee to Baal. And God has made promises to the remnant.

It's always about how he's going to shelter them, he's going to protect them, he's going to preserve them. There's a horrible judgement coming on the nation, but he's going to do good to his remnant. And it's in that context that the prophet usually then springboards into a discussion of the Messianic age, the coming of the Messiah.

And how the coming of the Messiah will be a time of great peace and great justice and great righteousness and great joy and prosperity for God's people. Now it's those passages I want to spend the rest of my time on and then we're going to quit. The Messianic age.

I told you that Christ is the subject, the main subject of the prophets, the Messiah. But even when the Messiah is not mentioned, there are many passages where his presence is implied or taken for granted. Where there's a time of righteousness, a time of peace, a time of God vindicating his people.

An age that we can, for lack of a better title, call the age of the Messianic kingdom. This age, the Jews understood, would be inaugurated by the Messiah coming. When the Messiah comes, then there will be peace, then Israel will be vindicated, then the Gentiles will stop persecuting us, then we'll show them who's God's people.

God will show them. And there was this expectation that the Messiah is going to come and there are many, many passages in the prophets about this age. As near as I can tell, virtually every prophet, with the possible exception of Jonah and Obadiah.

Obadiah is only one chapter long, it's about Edom. And Jonah prophesied to Nineveh. And maybe Nahum, who also prophesied to Nineveh.

But apart from those that were prophesying to other countries, virtually all the prophets have repeated references to the Messianic age. But the Messianic age needs to be understood properly and not all Christians have necessarily understood it the same way. That's what the chart is about on the back of your sheet.

There are many, many Old Testament passages. They're the high points. The high points

of the prophetic books are these Messianic passages.

There's probably at least twenty of them in the book of Isaiah alone. I haven't counted them up, but it's a reasonable estimate. Jeremiah probably has another dozen or more references to the Messianic age.

Even Micah, that short book of only seven chapters probably has three or four passages that are Messianic. And they are always talking about the same thing. The age when the Messiah rules.

Now Christians have taken these passages, well some Christians take them one way, some take them another way. The Jews understood correctly that this Messianic age would be inaugurated by the coming of the Messiah. The Messiah has to come and then this age will begin.

However, Christians who received Jesus as the Messiah don't all agree exactly about the start or the commencement of this age. Historically, Christians believed that this age began with the first coming of Christ. And all the references to peace and righteousness and so forth were spiritual.

That is to say, the people of God, the church, people who follow Jesus, the disciples, they have this joy, they have this peace, they have this righteousness. It's not a universal world situation at this point. It's something Jesus inaugurated, but it's only for his people.

And his people are the remnant who we call the church. And the passages are describing things in terms the Jews would understand as literal, but the apostles understood them as spiritual. Therefore, the Messianic age is now.

It started with the first coming of Christ. It will be consummated at the second coming of Christ. And then there's the new heavens and new earth where it will be realized universally.

In the meantime, it's realized by those who are followers of Christ. If you are in Christ, you are a new creation. If you are in Christ, you experience the things that were promised by the prophets.

Now that's the way the church historically understood this. Dispensationalism arose, as I'm sure most of you know, in 1830. And the dispensational view, which has become the most popular view today, teaches that the Messianic age did not begin when Jesus was here the first time.

Dispensationalism teaches that Jesus came promising that age and even intending to inaugurate that age, but because the Jews rejected him and crucified him, that age was postponed. And, when he comes back, he will then inaugurate that age for a thousand years, which will be the millennium. So that the dispensational view is, yes, it does take

the coming of Christ to start the Messianic age, but it has to be the second coming that will do it.

Whereas historic Christianity taught it, it's the first coming that did it. Now the difference between these two is that the dispensationalists take these prophecies more or less literally, just like the Jews did. They see it as a time of world peace, world prosperity, and so forth.

They say, well, it hasn't happened, so obviously it was postponed. And so the question becomes, what is the correct understanding of these many, many passages about the Messianic age? Are they about the age that Jesus inaugurated at his first coming? Or are they about a future age that was postponed and won't come until his second coming? That's where this chart can be helpful to you. I made this chart several years ago, and if you've ever been through my series on eschatology, I allude to this chart in those lectures.

In fact, this chart's the single most requested piece of printed material I have that people write and ask me to send them, because it's very helpful. And if you'll look at the way it's laid out, look at the left vertical column. At the top it says, Old Testament, New Testament.

Old Testament passage, and then as you look down the columns, it's got Psalm 72, Isaiah 2, Isaiah 9, Isaiah 11, Isaiah 35, Jeremiah 33, etc. In other words, we have several Old Testament passages that we're considering in this chart. All of them belong to this category of the Messianic age.

All of them are examples of what I was talking about, these passages that describe the age of the Messiah. Now, there are certain recurring images that apply to that age, including reference to the restoration of David's throne, the idea that the Gentiles will be subdued and worshiping God, the idea that God will cause the exiles to return like a second exodus over a highway that God's going to create, that there's going to be peace and prosperity for the people. There's mention of worshiping in the temple, again, like the Jewish temple.

Salvation and restoration is one of the themes. Everlasting duration of this period is mentioned several times in these passages. Of course, I'm reading across the top horizontal line there.

The left vertical column gives a list of the very passages that are brought into consideration for this experiment. The two top horizontal column gives a list of various features of the Messianic age that recur in many of the passages. Then, as you look down each column, you can see, for example, that Psalm 72, in verse 1, mentions the Davidic kingdom, so that feature is in that psalm.

In verses 8 through 11, Psalm 72 mentions the subduing of the Gentiles and so forth. Notice temple worship is not found in Psalm 72. It doesn't mention that there.

Though, that is mentioned in the next passage, which is Isaiah chapter 2. It mentions the temple worship and also peace and also Gentiles subdued, but it doesn't mention the Davidic kingdom. You can see that not all these passages mention all the features, but all of them mention some of the features, and all of the features are found in a number of passages. Now, the other thing to note about this chart is the bottom horizontal column, which says fulfilled, and you read across to the right, what you have here is New Testament passages that speak of the fulfillment of each of these features.

So, if column 2 says the Davidic kingdom, and you can see many of these passages mention the Davidic kingdom, down at the bottom we have Acts chapter 2, verses 29 and following, and Acts 13.32 and following. These are New Testament passages that talk about the fulfillment of the Davidic kingdom. Then you go to the next column, Gentiles subdued.

Go down there, Romans 5.16, and there's an example of this particular theme of these passages being fulfilled in the New Testament, and so with all of them. At the bottom of each column, then, we have a New Testament reference showing that that feature of the Messianic age is declared to be fulfilled in the New Testament. But then if you look at the far left column, the vertical column, these are places where the very passages, these Old Testament passages we're talking about, are quoted in the New Testament.

So that Isaiah chapter 9 is quoted in Matthew 4. Isaiah 11 is quoted in Romans 15.10, and so forth. You have the New Testament quoting or alluding to these exact passages under consideration. Now I'll let you do your own study on this chart if you're interested in doing it.

It's worthwhile. If you look up those New Testament references, you'll see that every time a New Testament writer quotes from one of these Messianic passages, he quotes it as if it is now. Every New Testament writer who quoted from any of the Messianic passages quoted it as being presently fulfilled in the age of the church.

That is to say, the first coming of Jesus inaugurated that age as far as the apostles were concerned. Furthermore, if you take the individual features of those passages, which are delineated in these separate columns, and read what the New Testament says, each of these features are separately said to be fulfilled in the New Testament church. So that there's really nothing about these Messianic passages that is left by New Testament writers to be anticipated at the second coming of Christ.

They are talking about the age that we're living in. Now that requires it to be spiritualized, but that shouldn't be too surprising. The Apostle Paul said in Romans 14 and 17, the kingdom of God is not food and drink.

The kingdom of God is righteousness, that means justice. Justice and righteousness are the same word in the Greek. Peace and joy.

The kingdom of God is righteousness, or justice, and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Now what is it? Spiritual peace. It's spiritual joy.

These are fruits of the Spirit. Paul is saying that the joy and the peace and the justice and the features of the Messianic kingdom predicted in the Old Testament are known to us through the Holy Spirit. They are spiritually realized through the people of God who have been born of the Spirit and walk in the Spirit.

The kingdom of God, therefore, is realized in the age of the church among the true disciples of Jesus. And that's how the New Testament writers understood it. So that chart is something I'll leave with you to study on your own if you're interested.

It will repay any time spent looking those things up. Because then, when you're reading through the Old Testament prophets, the thing you will find more often than anything else is the recurrence of these kinds of passages about the Messiah. And as you read them and recognize, the New Testament writers, whom Jesus opened their understanding that they might comprehend the Scriptures, those writers applied these to the age they were living in, which is the age we're living in.

And they spiritualized them. So it gives you a bit of a handle on the way that the Old Testament prophets are spiritualized by the New Testament writers. And therefore, when you read the Old Testament, you get kind of an instinct for what the spiritual meaning of some of this stuff is, especially as you see the recurring themes.

Let me encourage you that the best way you can understand the Old Testament prophets, I'm convinced, is by reading them repeatedly. And, of course, looking up what the New Testament writers said about them. But just reading them repeatedly will clear up a lot of the haze.

Because if you're familiar already with the New Testament, the more you read the prophets, the more you'll just instinctively remember, oh yeah, the New Testament writers, they kind of took this passage that way, or a similar passage, this one that way. And suddenly the prophets become a book for the church. The parts of the Bible that have been most obscure to the church should not be obscure to the church.

The Old Testament was the only Bible that Jesus ever preached from, or the apostles ever preached from. They didn't have New Testament. They were writing it.

When they preached from the Bible, they were preaching from the Old Testament, from the Psalms and the prophets, more often than anything else, judging from how much they quoted from those. And so, it seems that the early Christians were able to read the books of the prophets and read them as if, hey, this is our book. This is our covenant.

This is our experience. This is about Jesus, the Jesus we know. These promises are fulfilled to us.

But they had to spiritualize them in order to take them for themselves. But that's exactly what they did. And the question, of course, is, is that legitimate? I say, of course it is.

The way the apostles took it is the right way to take it because Jesus gave them that understanding. And although we, of course, are not accustomed to taking literature that way, that's our defect. We need to get used to it.

Deal with it. Because the way the New Testament writers have taken it requires us to spiritualize a great deal of material. Now, in the notes, when I made the notes I handed out to you, I actually intended to look up all those scriptures.

But as you can see, we didn't look up any of them and we still ran out of time. So, obviously, it was wise of me not to look them up. But you can look them up and you can see them as examples of the things I've been saying.

And once you're acquainted with these recurring themes, once you're familiar with the things the New Testament writers said about these things, it opens up the prophets in a new way. I tell you, I'm not at all intimidated teaching the prophets anymore like I was when I started out. The first time I was asked to go speak for a Youth with a Mission school of biblical studies, and I wanted to make a good impression because it was my first time there, they asked me to speak on Zechariah, Haggai and Malachi.

And I had never taught any of those books before. It was actually the same year, it was the first year of the Great Commission school and I had not taught those books yet. And I was terrified.

And I had good reason to be terrified. Those books are really hard to understand. But I'll tell you, just from being forced to read them, forced to study them, I can say those books are not so intimidating after you've gone through them a few times.

And anything that you find difficult in the prophets, don't let that dissuade you from reading them. Let that inspire you in the other direction. The fact that you don't understand it means read it more.

Because the more you read it, the more it will become an environment you're comfortable in, that you're familiar with, that you're at home with. And the prophets are full of very edifying stuff. Again, that's why I said the Old Testament is the only Bible the New Testament writers ever read or preached from.

They found it very edifying. They found it very useful. And we can too, as long as we understand that when we're reading about these promises and so forth, they are fulfilled for us.

They're fulfilled in Christ. They're not something that's off talking about the end times that haven't come yet. This is about now.

But we have to understand how the Holy Spirit illuminated that to the apostles and we need him to illuminate it to us too. So, I mean, it's not just a matter of learning methods of understanding. Obviously, the natural man can't receive the things of the Spirit of God.

They have to be spiritually discerned. So, we need to be spiritual people if we're going to get anything out of it. But I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt that that's the case.

I don't know all of you, but I think you're all spiritual people. So, I expect the next thing is just to spend the time. Spend the time reading them again and again and again.

And it'll be worth it. It'll be very much worth the time spent. Because once the prophets begin to open up to you, it's like you've discovered a new Bible.

And it's a wonderful thing. Very edifying.