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Can We Take the Prophecies Literally?

by Thomas Houghton

This following article by Mr Thomas Houghton appeared in the April/May 2006, edition of the Watching and Waiting magazine, published by the Sovereign Grace Advent Testimony, though the article was penned well over 60 years ago. Time has not diminished the relevancy of its message. If there ever was a need for God's people to take heed to the prophecies of God's Word it is now.

For too long, an interpretation has been placed upon such Scriptures that makes what God says to be so general and unspecific, so vague and unfocused, as to be almost meaningless as far as their usefulness in our understanding of the times is concerned.

Such prophecies were intended as signs (warnings, portents). If they are not understood literally of what use are they? What purpose can they serve in the future?

Mr Houghton shows how prophecy served God's people in the past and therefore how we may expect them to serve us today and in the future.

Here is a timely word for God's people today.

Ivan Foster (Editor)

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Amongst 'Present-Day Prophetic Problems' is the question, 'Can we take the prophecies literally? The prophecies referred to are those which came not by the will of man, but which 'holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.' Can we explain them, not in a figurative sense, but in their plain, exact and grammatical meaning? Figurative language is, of course, sometimes used in prophecy. Joseph dreamed a dream which represented him and his brethren binding sheaves in a field and his sheaf stood upright and their sheaves made obeisance to his sheaf. The language was figurative, but it predicted a time when Joseph's brethren would 'bow down themselves before him with their faces to the earth' (Genesis 42:6, 9).

Nebuchadnezzar's dream of a great image, consisting of gold, silver, brass, iron and clay was figurative, but Daniel's inspired interpretation showed that it pointed to four great literal empires which should arise. To the king he said, 'Thou art this head of gold' (Daniel 2:3.8). Figuratively the king was represented by the head of gold which denoted the Babylonian empire.

The first prophecy

A great many of the prophecies of the Bible are literal in their language and in their fulfilment. This may be said of the first prophecy, which occurs in Scripture. God, having put Adam into the garden of Eden, said to him, 'Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die' (Genesis 2: 16-17). Here we have a literal prediction which for about six thousand years has been literally fulfilled. It is a prediction which referred to Adam and his posterity. 'By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned' i.e. sinned in Adam (Romans 5: 12). All men are sinners by imputation, sinners by nature, and sinners by practice, and 'it is appointed unto men once to die' (Hebrews 9:27). It was appointed and predicted in the garden of Eden, and the prediction has been, and is still, literally fulfilled.

In Genesis 5 the words 'And he died' occur eight times. Adam lived for 930 years, but at last 'he died.' Methu-



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selah lived 969 years, but 'he died.' The world of the ungodly all died in Noah's time through the flood which overwhelmed them. The patriarchs died; Moses died; all the saints of God in Old Testament days, except Enoch and Elijah, died. Death has been literally experienced ever since the fall. Often it comes gradually through disease, accident, or old age. Often it comes to large numbers at a time, through war, pestilence, famine, earthquakes, and shipwrecks. The same process, however, literally goes on according to the Divine prediction. We are especially impressed with its literal fulfilment in times of war, famine and pestilence, but the only difference is that in times of war, millions may be carried off in a short time, whereas in normal times the numbers affected are comparatively small and death takes place more gradually.

The prophecy to Abraham

God said to Abraham, when he was 75 years old, 'Unto thy seed will I give this land' (Genesis 12:7). At that time, Abraham was childless. Before the prophecy was fulfilled Abraham reached the age of 100 years, and Sarah was 90. At that time its fulfilment seemed impossible, but 'the LORD visited Sarah as He had said and the LORD did unto Sarah as He had spoken' (Genesis 21: 1), and Abraham was so strong in faith that He was fully persuaded that what God had literally promised He was able also literally to perform. Sarah 'judged Him faithful Who had promised (Hebrews 11:11). We need to follow her example. All the promises or prophecies of God are Yea and Amen. He says, 'I am God and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand and I will do all My pleasure . . . I have spoken it, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed it, I will also do it'(Isaiah 46:9-11).

Prophecies already fulfilled

Firstly, we can take prophecies literally, because many literal prophecies have already been literally fulfilled.

This is true of the prophecies concerning our Lord's first coming.

The place of His birth was literally foretold and literally fulfilled. The wise men asked 'Where is He that is born King of the Jews?' To answer this question Herod demanded of the chief priests and scribes where Christ should be born. Their answer was 'In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule My people Israel' (see Matthew 2: 1- 6; Micah 5:2).

His being Divinely anointed with the Holy Ghost was literally predicted and literally fulfilled. Prophecy said, 'The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him: God said, 'I have put My Spirit upon Him: He Himself said in prophecy, 'The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me: because the LORD hath anointed Me to preach good tidings unto the meek' (Isaiah 11:I: 42: 1; 61:2).

At His baptism this was literally fulfilled and immediately thereafter He is described as 'being full of the Holy Ghost' (Luke 4: 1). Later, Peter said of Him, 'God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power (Acts 10:38).

His miracles were literally predicted and literally wrought. 'Behold your God will come . . . Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing.' When John asked 'Art Thou He that should come?' the Lord pointed to the literal fulfilment of this prophecy in proof that he was the predicted Messiah. 'The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear' (Isaiah 35:4-6: Matthew 11:3-5).

His prophetic office was literally predicted and literally held. Prophecy said 'I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren . . . and will put My words in His mouth: and He shall speak unto them all that I shall command Him.'

The fulfilment is seen to be literal when we read 'He Whom God hath sent speaketh the words of God: for God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto Him.' 'I have given unto them the words which Thou gavest Me.'



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'God . . . hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son.' 'This is of a truth that Prophet that should come into the world.' 'A Prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people' (Deuteronomy 18:18; John 3:34; 17:8; Hebrews 1:1-2; John 6:14; Luke 24:19).

His priestly office was literally predicted and literally assumed. To Him prophecy said, 'Thou art a Priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.' As the High Priest of good things to come He 'through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God' and by His one offering 'perfected for ever them that are sanctified' (Psalm 110:4; Hebrews 9:11, 14; 10:14).

His kingly office was literally predicted and literally claimed. Prophecy said, 'Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee . . . lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass' (Zechariah 9:9). How literally this was fulfilled! 'Ye shall find an ass, and a colt with her. Loose them, and bring them unto Me.' Both animals were brought, but 'Jesus, when He had found a young ass, sat thereon; as it is written, Fear not, daughter of Sion: behold, thy King cometh, sitting on an ass's colt' (Matthew 21: 2, 7; John 12:14-15). What was the cry of the multitude who accompanied Him as He rode into Jerusalem? 'Blessed is the King of Israel that cometh in the name of the Lord' (John 12:13).

The details about His mission, His rejection and crucifixion were literally predicted and literally fulfilled. Prophecy said, 'He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief' (Isaiah 53:3). History says. 'He came unto His own, and His own received Him not' (John 1:12). They 'led Him unto the brow of the hill whereon their city was built, that they might cast Him down headlong' (Luke 4:29). 'They took up stones to cast at Him' (John 8:59). They took counsel together to put Him to death. They brought Him in as guilty of blasphemy and said, 'He is guilty of death' (Matthew 26:66). The penalty of blasphemy was stoning. Why did they not stone Him to death? Because prophecy had literally predicted His crucifixion. It said, 'They pierced My hands and My feet' (Psalm 22: 16). Hence His hands and His feet were literally nailed to the cross. When He was dead 'they brake not His legs: but one of the soldiers with a spear pierced His side.' Why? Because prophecy had literally predicted that 'a bone of Him shall not be broken' and 'they shall look on Him Whom they pierced' (John 19:33-37). Prophecy said literally, 'They part My garments among them, and cast lots upon My vesture' (Psalm 22: 18). History records that this prophecy was fulfilled to the very letter (John 19:23-24). His resurrection was foretold and typified, and it literally took place.

His ascension was literally foretold and it literally took place. 'Thou hast ascended on high, Thou hast led captivity captive' (Psalm 68:18), said prophecy. Prophecy foretold His session at the right hand of God. History records that He is on the right hand of God crowned with glory and honour (see Psalm 110:1; 1 Peter 3:22; Hebrews 2:9).

Prophecies to be fulfilled

Secondly, we can and should take the prophecies literally in regard to our Lord's Second Coming.

That coming will be personal. 'I will come again' (John 14:3). This same Jesus . . . shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven' (Acts 1:11). 'The Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout' (1 Thessalonians 4: 16).

His coming will be public, not secret. 'If they shall say . . . behold, He is in the secret chambers; believe it not. For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be' (Matthew 24:26-27). 'Every eye shall see Him' (Revelation 1:7).

His coming will be at a predestined time, not at any moment. God His Father has said, 'Sit Thou at My right hand until I make Thine enemies Thy footstool.' Hence Peter said, 'Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things.' Hence, too, the Epistle to the Hebrews says, 'This Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God; from henceforth expecting till His enemies be made His footstool' (see Psalm 110:1; Acts 3:21; Hebrews 10:12-13).



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He will thus literally come in person, publicly manifest His presence, and He will not come until His predestined hour has come.

Further, His coming will be preceded by remarkable literal signs and events. Our Lord teaches us that immediately after the great tribulation, and before His visible coming, 'shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken' (Matthew 24:29).

Instead of taking this prophecy literally it is said that 'nearly every expression will be found used of the Lord's coming in terrible national judgments' (Dr. David Brown in Jamieson, Fausset and Brown's Commentary on Mark 13:25). We hold, however, that this prediction of our Lord can be, and should be taken literally. In Luke's Gospel our Lord says. 'There shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity: the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of the heavens shall be shaken' (21:25-26).

Thus the signs in the heavenly bodies, the distress of nations, the perplexity due to the roaring of the sea, the fainting of men for fear, and the expectation of things coming on the world will all be due to the shaking of the powers of the heavens. 'For the powers of the heavens shall be shaken.' Grimm's Greek Lexicon of the New Testament explains these powers of the heaven to be 'the hosts of heaven, the stars.'

Moses speaks of 'the host of heaven' as all the heavenly bodies. He says. 'Lest thou lift up thine eyes unto heaven, and when thou seest the sun, and the moon, and the stars, even all the host of heaven, shouldest be driven to worship them' (Deuteronomy 4: 19). The powers of the heavens, then, even all the heavenly bodies, shall be shaken immediately before the Lord comes. The shaking of the heavenly bodies will cause the sun to be darkened and the moon not to give her light, and the stars to fall from their present places. Such remarkable phenomena will cause distress of nations, perplexity, fainting for fear, and will be thought to signify terrible things coming on the world.

But why doubt the literal shaking of the heavenly bodies? The earth is a heavenly body, and earthquakes or shakings of the earth have taken place very frequently, and God has definitely predicted in simple and literal language the shaking of the heavens. When He descended on Sinai, 'the whole mount quaked greatly' (Exodus 19:18). 'Whose voice then shook the earth (a heavenly body) but now He hath promised saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven. And this word yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain' (Hebrews 12:26-27; Haggai 2:6-7; Joel 3:16). Immediately following the shaking of the powers of heaven we read, 'And then shall they see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh' (Luke 21:27-28).

The things which will cause fear and distress to the ungodly are intended to cheer the hearts of the godly. They are bidden to look up, for their redemption draweth nigh.

Resulting from the Lord's coming will be the resurrection glory of His people, the literal overthrow of the Antichrist and all his adherents, the conversion of Israel and the Lord's millennial reign. Prophecies of the blessings associated with that period will, we believe, be literally fulfilled.

The first resurrection will be literal. We are not dependent on Revelation 20 for the doctrine of two resurrections. The apostle Paul says, 'there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust' (Acts 24:15).

The great resurrection chapter in 1 Corinthians speaks only of the first resurrection - the resurrection of the just: 'Every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at His coming' (15:23). They that are Christ's are they who will be raised 'at His coming.' 'Then cometh the end,' presumably at the end of the thousand years. During that period Christ puts down all His enemies, and 'the last



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enemy that shall be destroyed is death' (15:26). In other words, death and hell will be cast into the lake of fire after the final resurrection takes place (Revelation 20:11-14).

In 1 Thessalonians, the apostle again speaks of the literal resurrection of the just. When the Lord descends from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God 'the dead in Christ shall rise first' (4:16). The risen and changed saints will be literally caught up to meet the Lord in the air and will for ever be with their Lord in the heavenly mansions. They will literally reign with Him when He takes to Himself His great power and reigns.

All Israel shall literally be saved as a result of the coming of their Divine Deliverer. Their sun shall then no more go down; neither shall their moon withdraw itself. The LORD shall be their everlasting light; and the days of their mourning shall be ended (see Isaiah 60:20).

The man of sin will be literally consumed with the brightness of Christ's coming. Together with all his adherents judgment will be visited upon them (2 Thessalonians 2:8-12).

All nations shall then flow unto Zion. They will go up — perhaps representatively — to the house of the God of Jacob and He will teach them of His ways and they will walk in His paths. He, the LORD Jesus Christ, shall exercise kingly and judicial functions among the nations, and 'they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.' The government shall be upon Christ's shoulder. With judgment and with justice He will reign.

There will be a special and literal manifestation of His kingly power. Without leaving His throne in the heavens He will be King over all the earth. All people, nations, and languages shall serve Him. His kingdom will not be destroyed. He will reign in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and His dominion shall be 'from sea to sea, and from the river even to the ends of the earth,' 'Yea, all kings shall fall down before Him: all nations shall serve Him.' 'All the ends of the earth shall fear Him' (see Isaiah 2:2-4; 9:6-7; Daniel 7:13-14; Isaiah 24:23; Zechariah 9: 10; Psalm 72:8, 11; 67:7).

There will be a literal change in the dumb animals. 'The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid . . . the lion shall eat straw like the ox' (Isaiah 11:6-7). Why should we object to the literal fulfilment of this prophecy? Before the flood all the dumb animals were vegetarians. They did not then devour each other (see Genesis 1:30; 9:2, 3, 5).

Finally, Satan will be literally loosed from his prison for a season, at the end of the thousand years of the reign of Christ and His people. He will lead a final rebellion against God. But he will be cast into the lake of fire and brimstone 'and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever' (Revelation 20:3.7-10).

Then follows the final resurrection, and whosoever will not be found written in the book of life will be cast into the lake of fire. The present heavens and the present earth will then be destroyed. The earth and the works that are therein shall be burned up. The heavens being on fire shall be dissolved and the elements shall melt with fervent heat. We believers, however, 'according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.'

Then the great prophecy shall be literally fulfilled, 'Behold the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be with them and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away' (see 2 Peter 3:7, 10,12, 13; Revelation 20:11-15; 21:1-4).

'Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of Him in peace, without spot, and blameless,' and 'comfort one another with these words' (2 Peter 3:14; 1 Thessalonians 4:18).



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Mr Houghton was, for many years, the editor of 'The Gospel Magazine.' In fact, we understand that there has only been one other editor, through the long years of the magazine's history, that has held the post for a longer period than Mr Houghton. He used to speak regularly at the conferences of the Sovereign Grace Advent Testimony, and, following his being called home in January, 1951, many of these messages were printed together in a book entitled 'The Faith and Hope of the Future.'

SGAT still have some copies of this work which are obtainable, hardback, at £5 each.

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