

# Understanding Prophetic Fulfillment

(All quoted scripture comes from the New American Standard Bible [NASB])

Students of prophecy, both modern and Biblical, watch for the fulfillment of the various prophecies of God. But do we really understand how these prophecies are fulfilled? What I wish to do in this article is to look at the Biblical fulfillment of prophecies, including what the Word says about *conditional prophecies*, to gain a full understanding from God's perspective.

Since I have used the term "*conditional prophecies*" in the last paragraph I need to explain what I mean by it. A conditional prophecy simply does not happen unless certain conditions apply; or will only happen if certain circumstances occur. For example if a prophecy stated that a certain judgment would occur if the people did not repent, and then repentance took place among the people, then this prophecy would not happen. But this would not mean a failure of the prophecy, but rather that the conditions for the fulfillment were not met.

There is another aspect of the fulfillment that also needs to be addressed. It is this that I wish to look at first. After which I will come back to deal with the conditional type of prophecy.

When a prophecy is fulfilled in front of our eyes would we recognized it? Would we be able to say, "Yes, I can see this prophecy being fulfilled now?"

Of course, there are many circumstances in which we would be able to say this. But I wish to point out that many prophecies are not fulfilled in such a simple context. Many are fulfilled in strange and unpredictable ways. Indeed, as we will see below, the revealed prophecies of God rarely give us enough information to understand the circumstances of how it will be fulfilled.

Let's look first at a number of Messianic prophecies from the Old Testament of Scripture and compare these to how they were fulfilled in the New Testament.

3 A voice is called,  
"Clear the Way for the Lord in the wilderness;  
Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. Isaiah 40:3

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1 Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying,  
2 "Repent for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand."  
3 For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet, saying,  
"The voice of one crying in the wilderness,  
'Make ready the way of the Lord,  
Make His paths straight!'" Matthew 3:1-3

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Now we understand that the quote from Isaiah is a reference to John the Baptist preparing the way for the Messiah. However, if you did not have the New Testament to confirm that this indeed did refer to John the Baptist and Jesus, how would you understand the way in which it would be fulfilled? It is very clear that until it is quoted in the New Testament people did not have an understanding of what it meant or how it would come to pass.

Another example from Jeremiah:

15 Thus says the Lord,  
"A voice is heard in Ramah,  
Lamentation and bitter weeping.  
Rachel is weeping for her children;  
She refused to be comforted for her children,  
Because they are no more." Jeremiah 31:15

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16 Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and went and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its environs, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the magi.

17 Then that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled, saying,

18 "A voice was heard in Ramah,  
Weeping and great mourning,  
Rachel weeping for her children;  
And she refused to be comforted,  
Because they were no more." Matthew 2:16-18

The circumstances that surrounded this sad fulfillment were not clear until it actually took place. While we can determine that the children were killed, we cannot know how or when this would come to pass.

Another example from the prophet Isaiah makes the difficulty in understanding prophetic fulfillment even more clear.

1 But there will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish; in earlier times He treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali with contempt, but later on He shall make it glorious, by the way of the sea, on the other side of Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles.

2 The people who walk in darkness  
Will see a great light;  
Those who live in a dark land,  
The light will shine on them. Isaiah 9:1-2

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12 Now when He [Jesus] heard that John had been taken into custody, He withdrew into Galilee;

13 and leaving Nazareth, He came and settled in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali.

14 This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet saying,

15 "The Land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,

By way of the sea, Beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles--

16 "The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great light,  
And to those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death,  
Upon them a light dawned. Matthew 4:12-16

As we look at the prophecy in Isaiah it is beyond the understanding provided to see the meaning of the passage. It would be impossible for someone who was not familiar with the fulfillment in the New Testament to explain what the meaning is, or under what circumstances it would be fulfilled. There is no indication that this is a reference to the movements of the Messiah.

One last example that I will use is found in Psalms.

2 I will open my mouth in a parable;  
I will utter dark sayings of old, Psalms 78:2

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34 All these things Jesus spoke to the multitudes in parables, and He did not speak to them without a parable,

35 so that what was spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying,

"I will open My mouth in parables;

I will utter things hidden since the foundation of the world." Matthew 13:34-35

We find this prophecy in Psalms does not mention the Messiah. Indeed there is no indication that this is even a prophecy. The statement in Psalms leaves the reader with no clue as to its meaning.

Such is the situation with respect to many of the various prophecies concerning Jesus first coming. They are fulfilled in every way; but they also give only a part of the facts of their fulfillment. They are a small part of the overall view. When we read a prophecy it is dangerous to assume that we can understand exactly how it will be fulfilled and the facts that may surround it.

Many prophecies in the Word of God are similar to this. Even prophecy today has this aspect to it. God reveals only parts of the picture of what is to come. It is only by perfect hindsight that we can properly understand the full meaning of any given prophecy.

Much of the reason for this lies in the fact that we are to walk by faith, not by sight (II Corinthians 5:7). If we were to know all the facts of what is to come, we would try

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and figure out how to walk through the circumstances in our own flesh; rather than to walk by faith by the leading of the Holy Spirit and in the protection of our God.

To understand prophetic fulfillment even more completely we need to look at conditional prophecies.

10 “Now as for you, son of man, say to the house of Israel, ‘Thus you have spoken, saying, “Surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we are rotting away in them; how then can we survive?”’

11 “Say to them, ‘As I live!’ declares the Lord God, ‘I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! Why then will you die, O house of Israel?’

12 “And you, son of man, say to your fellow citizens, ‘The righteousness of a righteous man will not deliver him in the day of his transgression, and as for the wickedness of the wicked, he will not stumble because of it in the day when he turns from his wickedness; whereas a righteous man will not be able to live by his righteousness on the day when he commits sin.’

13 “When I say to the righteous he will surely live, and he so trusts in his righteousness that he commits iniquity, none of his righteous deeds will be remembered; but in that same iniquity of his which he has committed he will die.

14 “But when I say to the wicked, ‘You will surely die,’ and he turns from his sin and practices justice and righteousness,

15 if a wicked man restores a pledge, pays back what he has taken by robbery, walks by the statutes which ensure life without committing iniquity, he will surely live; he shall not die.

16 “None of his sins that he has committed will be remembered against him. He has practiced justice and righteousness; he will surely live. Ezekiel 33:10-16

This is quite a passage of Scripture! The prophet Ezekiel has had God outline to him the method in which He handles judgmental prophecies and whether they will be fulfilled or not.

**That is correct! Not all judgments of God are carried out.** There are always conditions even if it is not specifically stated. If a man or a nation repents, the judgments that God has proclaimed against them will not be carried out. This is an important revelation of how fair God is, and even more important to understanding why some judgments of God are not carried out when there is true repentance from the heart.

We find an example of this in the book of Jonah.

1 Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying,

2 “Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you.”

3 So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days walk.

4 Then Jonah began to go through the city one day’s walk; and he cried out and said, “Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”

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5 Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them.

6 When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat on the ashes.

7 And he issued a proclamation and it said, "In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water.

8 "But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands.

9 "Who knows, God may turn and relent, and withdraw His burning anger so that we shall not perish?"

10 When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And he did not do it. Jonah 3:1-10

As we look at the prophecy found in verse 4 we see that there are no conditions stated where this would not occur. But even though there were no conditions within the prophecy for them to repent of their sins and God would spare them; they nevertheless, went ahead with repentance because they had nothing to lose. They clearly believed the prophecy and wanted to turn back to God no matter what would happen.

Remember what was stated in Ezekiel:

14 "But when I say to the wicked, 'You will surely die,' and he turns from his sin and practices justice and righteousness,

15 if a wicked man restores a pledge, pays back what he has taken by robbery, walks by the statutes which ensure life without committing iniquity, he will surely live; he shall not die.

16 "None of his sins that he has committed will be remember against him. He has practiced justice and righteousness; he will surely live. Ezekiel 33:14-16

So, therefore, no one who has committed evil, when he repents, can be judged. God therefore, turned away from the judgments that He had prophesied on Nineveh because they repented from the heart and turned away from the sin which they had committed.

In understanding the fulfillment of any given prophecy we must take into account that we will not be able to have knowledge of all the facts concerning its completion. It is only in hindsight that we gain full knowledge of its meaning.

Remember that judgmental prophecies have for their purpose to bring people to repentance. Once that repentance comes there is no need for the judgments. Even when the judgments do come they tend to be drawn out over time by God to give the people more time to repent. God is slow to anger. But it is sure that the anger will come if the

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sin is continued. It is only when repentance does not come that the judgments will be brought down on us from on high.

Before we claim to understand what God is saying we need to realize that God sees this from an entirely different view than we do. He sometimes deliberately holds back information so that we do not have all the facts. This results in our having to live by faith and in daily direction from the Holy Spirit, rather than our attempting to understand a few words from God and live according to our mental capacity. It is sure that our own designs in living will result in trouble; but God's direction will always be correct!

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To contact Thomas S. Gibson: <[tsgibson@telusplanet.net](mailto:tsgibson@telusplanet.net)>, 1125 - 6 Ave, Wainwright, AB T9W 1G2, Canada

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