***Principles of Prophecy: A Study of Our Future Hope***

**Telling Time**

**Lesson 3 – September 15, 2013**

**Focus Thought**

God is not surprised by evil; His redemptive purpose will bring salvation.

**Focus Verses**

Isaiah 55:8-9

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

**Lesson Text**

Ephesians 3:1-11

1 For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles,

2 If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward:

3 How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; (as I wrote afore in few words,

4 Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ)

5 Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit;

6 That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel:

7 Whereof I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power.

8 Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ;

9 And to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ:

10 To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God,

11 According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

**Culture Connection**

Time Is Relative

by Scott Graham

In 1915, Albert Einstein published “The General Theory of Relativity,” which summarized the conclusions from his previous eight years of thoughts and research. While the specifics and details of this scholarly work are beyond most people’s comprehension, some of the principles contained in it make for fascinating hypothetical situations.

For instance, one of Einstein’s findings was that time is relative and not fixed. Specifically he proved mathematically that time slows down for an individual as his speed increases. This effect would become especially pronounced if a person could approach travel near the speed of light: 186,000 miles per second. While practically impossible, still in theory such a person would experience a significant slowdown in the passage of time. In fact, if a person were to travel for a year near this rate of speed and then return to Earth, he would discover that over twenty years had passed on Earth during that period. As strange and nearly impossible as this seems, such is the underlying mathematics of time’s relativity according to the great professor.

Perhaps even more difficult to grasp is the fact God exists outside of time entirely. He has no beginning or ending. Time is merely a part of His creation for our benefit. In that He is not confined by clock, calendar, or Einstein’s theory, our God can observe that which is not yet as though it already were. And He doesn’t even need a rocket ship to do so.

**Lesson Outline**

 **I. GOD’S PERSPECTIVE**

 A. Fixing the World’s Problems

 B. Telling Time Redemptively

 **II. FILLING IN THE GAPS**

 A. The Church as a Mystery

 B. A Time of Mercy

 C. Daniel’s Seventy Weeks

 **III. LIVING IN THE VALLEY**

**Contemplating the Topic**

Is it possible to surprise God? Since He declares “the end from the beginning,” the answer to that question has to be no. The translation of Isaiah 46:10 offered by the NLT makes this clear: “Only I can tell you the future before it even happens. Everything I plan will come to pass, for I do whatever I wish.”

Some who read Scripture seem compelled to try to map out dates for fulfillment of various prophecies. The complete failure of anyone to succeed in this effort should demonstrate the futility of date setting. God alone knows the timing of the events He has foretold through His prophets. Although it may seem with some prophecies that it would be possible to find a starting point, do simple math, and arrive at a firm fulfillment date, we must keep in mind that God does not think as we do.

Transparency 1 quotes Isaiah 55:8-9.

*“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9).*

It is appropriate for us to study the prophecies of Scripture and to proclaim that they will be fulfilled, but it is counterproductive to attach dates to them. To do so can threaten the faith of God’s people when predictions fail.

**Searching the Scriptures**

**I. GOD’S PERSPECTIVE**

Every parent who has taken a road trip with children has been asked, probably many times over, “Are we there yet?” But children are not the only ones who ask this question. Recently, I took my eighty-five-year-old mother on a drive from California’s San Joaquin Valley up into the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Along the way, she asked, “Are we there yet?”

All of us, on the various journeys of life—road trips, experiences with suffering, moments of exhilaration—have asked the same question. But our times are in God’s hand. (See Psalm 31:15.) As long as we are on this earth we have never truly reached our destination. And God alone knows the significance of the mile markers along the way. His perspective of time is different from ours. Whether in our personal lives or in the fulfillment of His prophecies, only He knows whether we are almost there.

**A. Fixing the World’s Problems**

Faith is not an attempt to manipulate God or to convince Him to do something He would not otherwise do. It is trust in God, regardless of life’s circumstances. We must keep this in mind, not only in the face of personal disappointments, but also as we view what may seem to us as God’s failure to intervene on the larger stage of human events.

The raw emotion of what some have called “disappointment with God” appears in the Psalms. “Why standest thou afar off, O Lord? why hidest thou thyself in times of trouble?” (Psalm 10:1). Even Jesus expressed this question as He prayed the words of Psalm 22. (See Matthew 27:46.)

*“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring? O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent” (Psalm 22:1-2).*

We must keep in mind, however, the limitations of our human perspective. We come onto the stage of life after thousands of years of history have transpired, we live a short time, and we depart this fleeting life. This reality is well captured in the poetry of the Psalms.

*“My days are like a shadow that declineth; and I am withered like grass” (Psalm 102:11).*

The next verse, however, reveals why God’s perspective on time is different from ours.

*“But thou, O Lord, shalt endure for ever; and thy remembrance unto all generations” (Psalm 102:12).*

During our few days on earth, it may seem to us that God is distant and uninvolved in the face of major world crises including evil wrought by human hands. But He has been at work since before Creation to deal with all the consequences of sin. Jesus is “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8). The last two chapters of the Book of Revelation reveal how God’s redemptive work recaptures the sinless beauty of Eden before human rebellion. (Compare, e.g., Genesis 2:9 and Revelation 22:2.)

In the meantime, just as God desires us to trust Him with our personal disappointments and questions, He also calls us to trust Him with the way He works out His redemptive plan, including the time frame of its fulfillment.

B. Telling Time Redemptively

Transparency 2 says, “Our limited perspective on time and human history sometimes causes us to think our day is the most evil and troubled day in the history of the world.”

Our limited perspective on time and human history sometimes causes us to think our day is the most evil and troubled day in the history of the world. When we think this way, we may wonder why God has not already arrived on the scene to punish evildoers and to usher in His reign of peace. These notions may sometimes result from a lack of awareness of the full scope of human history. In the face of the constant flow of information from the media about natural and man-made disasters, crime, violence, sickness, and disease, we may think this is a day unlike any other. The wisdom of Scripture, however, offers a correct view of these thoughts.

*“Say not thou, What is the cause that the former days were better than these? for thou dost not inquire wisely concerning this” (Ecclesiastes 7:10).*

The NLT translates Ecclesiastes 7:10, “Don’t long for ‘the good old days,’ for you don’t know whether they were any better than today.” Perhaps it would give us some realistic perspective to remember that in Genesis 4, when Cain killed Abel, the murder rate of the human population was 25 percent. As to why God does not wipe entire swaths of people off the earth today in judgment for their sins, we should keep in mind that He was willing to spare Sodom if only ten righteous people could have been found there.

It is true that “evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived” (II Timothy 3:13), but this apparently describes the progression of evil in the lives of individuals rather than the idea that things in general will be worse at one point in time more than in another. There is nothing in the context of this verse that suggests Paul had an era in mind. It is the nature of evil to progress in moral deterioration.

Even Jesus’ description of the future as similar to the days of Noah and Lot does not suggest that the future will be unusually evil. Rather, His description indicates that the future will be very much like the past, with things going on as usual until the end suddenly interrupts normality. There is nothing inherently evil about eating, drinking, marrying, buying, selling, planting, or building. (See Luke 17:26-28.) This is the normal discourse of life.

Scripture indicates that even as we look about us in shock and dismay at developments in our world, God is not surprised. Nor does He feel rushed to conclude His work due to unanticipated decay of the human condition. Rather, He is purposefully and intentionally accomplishing His purposes in Christ and the church. Even when we think surely God will shorten these days lest “no flesh should be saved” (Mark 13:20), we must remember we are gauging conditions through a human, not a divine, perspective.

*“In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will” (Ephesians 1:11).*

**II. FILLING IN THE GAPS**

**A. The Church as a Mystery**

*“If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward: how that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; (as I wrote afore in few words, whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ) which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel” (Ephesians 3:2-6).*

Some mistakenly interpret these words of Paul to mean that no one before the New Testament apostles and prophets had any knowledge about the church age. This would suppose that nothing in the Old Testament anticipated the church, which clearly was not the case. The prophets may not have understood the full portent of their prophetic messages about the church, but to those of us who look back from the vantage point of the church, their meanings take on great clarity.

The abundant use of the Old Testament in the New Testament, including Scriptures interpreted by the New Testament writers as being fulfilled in the church, clearly demonstrate the prophetic view of the church from Old Testament times.

Paul’s ministry, from the very beginning, is rich in the use of the Hebrew Scriptures to proclaim Christ as the promised Messiah and the work being done by Christ in the church as the fulfillment of Hebrew prophecy. The revelation was not, therefore, something radically new; it was a perspective on the Hebrew Scriptures not fully enjoyed by those who wrote them or by those who interpreted them prior to the era of the New Covenant.

Paul’s point seems to be that his revelation was a wider and deeper grasp of what had already been revealed in Scripture. Otherwise, we would expect him to make no appeal to the Hebrew Scriptures in his declaration of the gospel, including the union of Gentiles and Jews into one body. But this is not the case. Paul roots his teaching exclusively in the Scriptures. (See Acts 24:14; 25:8; 26:6, 22-23; 28:17, 20, 23; Romans 1:1-2; 3:21-22; 4:11, 16-18; 9:24-29; 10:5-13; 15:8-12, 21; 16:25-26; I Corinthians 2:7, 9-10; 10:6, 11; 15:3-4; II Corinthians 3:14; 6:2, 16-18; 7:1; Galatians 3:8, 14, 22, 28-29; Ephesians 1:9-10.)

In view of all that precedes Ephesians 3:5, it is difficult to read Paul’s words to mean that the Hebrew Scriptures include nothing about the Gentiles becoming fellow heirs. Indeed, Paul in the very next chapter quotes Psalm 68:18 to explain the gifts of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers to the church (Ephesians 4:7-14). Paul lived in the era of fulfillment and of the Spirit, an era that released the text of the Hebrew Scriptures to a dimension of fullness previously unavailable.

Again in his letter to the Colossians, Paul discussed “the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to His saints” (Colossians 1:26). This is the same mystery Paul has in view in his letter to the Ephesians; it concerns “the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27). But again Paul referred to the Hebrew Scriptures as the source of this mystery. Specifically, he saw the regulations concerning food, drink, festivals, new moons, and sabbaths—all integral to the law of Moses—as being “a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ” (Colossians 2:16-17).

In his first letter to Timothy, Paul described the church as “the pillar and ground of the truth” (I Timothy 3:15). It would seem strange to think that such a high evaluation would be made of an institution that has no place in the Hebrew Scriptures. In his second letter to Timothy, Paul declared that the Holy Scriptures—the Hebrew Scriptures that Timothy had known from childhood—“are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (II Timothy 3:15). It is precisely these Scriptures that are “profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works” (II Timothy 3:16-17).

If the Hebrew Scriptures are profitable for church doctrine, for the reproof, correction, and instruction of church members, and if they are capable of bringing a man of God who is in the church to completion, they surely are not bereft of any reference to the church. Before closing his letter, Paul appealed to Timothy for “the books, but especially the parchments” (II Timothy 4:13). No doubt these parchments were Old Testament Scriptures written on leather scrolls. If the Hebrew Scriptures contained nothing specific to the church, one wonders why Paul wished to have them as desperately as he wished to have his cloak.

Interpretations of Ephesians 3:5 that focus only on exegesis of the immediate context miss the influence on understanding available from the broader horizon of the use of the Hebrew Scriptures in the New Testament and specifically from Paul’s consistent use of the Old Testament as a testimony to Christ and the church.

**B. A Time of Mercy**

Someone remarked that one way to judge the skill of a pianist is not only by what notes are played, but also by what notes are not played. Amateur keyboardists sometimes are tempted to play as many notes at once as possible, resulting in a cluttered, unpleasant experience for those who listen. Professional musicians know the value of a clean, even spare, approach.

Similarly, it is significant not only which Scriptures, or which portions of Scripture, from the Old Testament are referenced in the New Testament, but which are not. For example, Jesus quoted from Isaiah 61:1-2 to explain His ministry.

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18-19).*

But Jesus stopped quoting partway through a sentence. Isaiah 61:2 continues, “and the day of vengeance of our God.” Apparently Jesus did not quote that phrase because, in His first coming, He would not fulfill this part of Isaiah’s prophecy. God’s vengeance will be revealed at the Second Coming. (See Revelation 19:11-21.) At His first coming, Jesus did not come “to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved” (John 3:17).

If we did not have Jesus’ use of Isaiah 61:1-2, we might think the day of God’s vengeance would follow hard on the heels of the acceptable year of the Lord. But Jesus’ use of Isaiah’s prophecy indicates that there is a gap of an undetermined length of time between these two events. Such gaps should further discourage us from the vain effort to set dates for the fulfillment of prophecy.

**C. Daniel’s Seventy Weeks**

When he was in captivity in Babylon, Daniel read Jeremiah 25:9-12 and 29:10-14. Wondering about the meaning of these texts, he prayed a prayer of repentance on behalf of all Israel. (See Daniel 9:3-19.) The angel Gabriel then appeared and gave him “skill to understand” that there was more at hand than just the seventy years foretold by Jeremiah; there were seventy “sevens,” or seventy “weeks of years” (490 years of 360 days each) determined for Daniel’s people (Israel) and his holy city (Jerusalem). (See Daniel 9:20-27.)

The first sixty-nine of these weeks (483 years) would begin with “the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem” (Daniel 9:25). This command was given to Nehemiah by Artaxerxes on March 14, 445 bc. (See Nehemiah 1:1-4; 2:1-6.) The 483 years ended with the coming of “Messiah the Prince” at Christ’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem on April 16, ad 32, 173,880 days later. (See Sir Robert Anderson’s The Coming Prince for an explanation of these dates.)

After sixty-two weeks, plus the previous seven weeks (Daniel 9:25), for a total of sixty-nine weeks, the Messiah would be “cut off,” a Hebraism for “put to death.” (See Daniel 9:26.) This would occur after the sixty-ninth week, but not during the seventieth week. This indicates a gap between the sixty-ninth and the seventieth weeks. The Messiah was not put to death during the sixty-ninth or the seventieth week.

Sometime after the Messiah was put to death, Jerusalem and the Temple would be destroyed by people associated with a prince who is to come (Daniel 9:26). This occurred in ad 70 when the Roman general Titus, with his armies, destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple. At some later point, this “prince that shall come” will “confirm the covenant,” apparently a peace covenant, with many (apparently the people of Israel), for one week, the final, seventieth week (Daniel 9:27). But three and one-half years into this “week,” “in the midst of the week,” this prince will break his covenant, ending the sacrifices and offerings in a newly constructed temple. It will seek to serve the religious needs of the Jewish community that has not yet embraced the Messiah but which seeks to reestablish the law of Moses. This may be the event Paul had in mind in II Thessalonians 2:3-4.

Gabriel said seventy weeks were determined; he did not say they had to be consecutive. The gap of time after Messiah’s death and before the arrival of the “prince that shall come,” like that between Jesus’ first and second comings, is a time of mercy of undetermined length.

Transparency 3 states, “The valleys between the prophetic mountain peaks are not about the ‘what’ (i.e., church age) but the ‘when.’”

**III. LIVING IN THE VALLEY**

The church age could be compared to a valley between two mountain peaks, a valley of undetermined length. This does not suggest the Hebrew prophets had no knowledge at all of the coming age of the church, but it does indicate that the period of time between Christ’s first and second comings was not revealed to the prophets. Further, their vision of the church age was hazy and limited by their partial understanding. This is why it is not helpful for us to try to chart the exact date of Christ’s return. Because of the limitations He willingly embraced in the Incarnation, Jesus Himself did not know the time of His return.

*“But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father” (Mark 13:32).*

If Jesus did not know the time of His coming, we certainly do not. Our role as we await His return is to look for His appearing and to “occupy” until He comes. (See Luke 19:13.)

By analogy, each of us also experiences valleys between the mountain peaks of life. There are times we clearly see God at work in our lives, providing, healing, and leading. But there are also periods of time, sometimes of great length, where we see no visible or tangible evidence of God’s activity on our behalf. It would be a mistake to think God has forgotten us during these periods of spiritual barrenness, suffering, or disappointment. We may not know how long these times will last, but we can know the day will come when the fog will lift and we will be able clearly to see God’s hand at work in our lives.

Asaph nearly lost his faith as he observed the prosperity of the wicked and compared it with his own suffering. (See Psalm 73.) He saw things more clearly, however, when he gained an eternal perspective.

*“When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me; until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end. Surely thou didst set them in slippery places: thou castedst them down into destruction. How are they brought into desolation, as in a moment! they are utterly consumed with terrors” (Psalm 73:16-19).*

After his vision was reoriented, Asaph confessed his error: “Thus my heart was grieved, and I was pricked in my reins. So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was as a beast before thee. Nevertheless I am continually with thee: thou hast holden me by my right hand. Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory” (Psalm 73:21-24).

**Internalizing the Message**

Sometimes we may be tempted to follow teachings that promise to reveal the date of Christ’s return. Many have done so during the last two thousand years, but all predictions have failed. Further, they will continue to do so. God did not choose to reveal the length of the church age or the time of Christ’s return. It is a waste of time to speculate about these things. It is far more fruitful to busy oneself with the opportunities for Christian service that God places in our path. It is enough to know with certainty that Jesus is coming; we do not need to know when. Not knowing when means it could be at any moment.

Likewise, we may wonder if we will ever come to the end of a trial of our faith. There is no way for us to know when these painful episodes will conclude, but we do know that they will.

*“There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it” (I Corinthians 10:13).*

We do not know when we will be able to make our escape from the trial, but to know that at some point we will be able to do so makes the trial bearable as we await our deliverance.

**Reflections**

• Discuss the benefits of leaving problems in God’s hands instead of succumbing to the temptation to try to “fix” the problems of other people or of the world at large.

• In addition to Isaiah 61 and Daniel 9, identify and discuss other possible gaps of time in biblical prophecies.

• What evidence exists in the Old Testament to indicate the Hebrew prophets foresaw the church age? Discuss.

• As we look back over valley experiences in our lives, can we see how our way of escape came when least expected? Discuss.

• What evidence exists to indicate that God’s thoughts are not our thoughts?