

The Big Picture of Prophecy

Throughout the centuries men and women have been fascinated with Bible prophecy. Although it is certainly true that an interest in prophecy has produced its share of wild-eyed fanatics and sensational headline grabbers, it's also true that an interest in prophecy has led many to a deep, bedrock spiritual experience. Fulfilled Bible prophecy leads to genuine faith in a genuine Messiah.

When Jesus came the first time, born as a babe in Bethlehem's manger, He came as the fulfillment of centuries-old prophecies. Jesus Himself declared, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15).^{*} The apostle Paul added, "When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son" (Gal. 4:4). And it was "in due [at the right] time Christ died for the ungodly" (Rom. 5:6). The birth, life, death, and resurrection of the Saviour reveal that heaven has a divine timetable of events.

A New World

History is not an endless cycle of events. It's moving, rather, toward one colossal event—the second coming of our Lord. Of all 66 books in the Bible, there are two—Daniel in the Old Testament and Revelation in the New Testament—that focus on this climax of history. Their emphasis is not on a coming catastrophe, but on a coming Christ. They speak not of a tragic ending, but of a glorious beginning. Deep within the hearts of people everywhere is a longing for peace and prosperity, health and happiness, forgiveness—and forever.

In Daniel and Revelation the prophets present a new world—a better world. They help us reach out and touch the kingdom of God. They give us glimpses of eternity.

Let's take a brief journey together through the prophetic books of Daniel and Revelation, and catch the inspiration of these hope-filled books. They give us a glimpse of prophecy's big picture.

The Great Image

The second chapter of the book of Daniel opens with the dream of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. "Now in the second year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; and his spirit was so troubled that his sleep left him" (Dan. 2:1).

The king knew his dream had unusual significance, but he could not remember it. The wisest men of his realm, unable either to reverse or interpret the king's dream, were threatened with death. At this crisis moment Daniel stepped forward, graciously requesting time to pray about the unsolved mystery.

Bible prophets do not speculate about the future. They reveal to us what God has revealed to them. Daniel clearly explained what King Nebuchadnezzar had dreamed. "You, O king, were watching; and behold, a great image!" (verse 31). The prophet then described this awesome figure for the king. It had a head of gold, breast and arms of

silver, thighs of brass, legs of iron, and feet of iron and clay (verses 31-33). The climax of the king's dream is a massive stone descending from heaven, striking the image on its feet, and finally becoming a mountain that fills the whole earth.

Daniel's explanation of the dream's meaning is just as precise as his description of its content. "You are this head of gold. But after you shall arise another kingdom inferior to yours; then another, a third kingdom of bronze, which shall rule over all the earth. And the fourth kingdom shall be as strong as iron" (Dan. 2:38-40, NKJV).

An Accurate Forecast

According to God's interpretation through the prophet Daniel, each metal represents a world-dominating kingdom. The dream depicts the rise and fall of nations. Daniel identifies Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom of Babylon with these words, "You are this head of gold" (verse 38). The Babylonian Empire ruled the Middle East and extended its dominion throughout the Mediterranean basin from 605 B.C. to 539 B.C.

This incredible prophecy in Daniel 2 also reveals that "another kingdom," symbolized in the breast and arms of silver, would arise. During a night of drunken debauchery a mysterious hand wrote words of judgment on Babylon's palace wall: "God has numbered your kingdom, and finished it. . . . Your kingdom has been divided, and given to the Medes and Persians" (Dan. 5:26-28).

The kingdom that followed Babylon was Media-Persia, both the Bible and history verifying this fact. The famed Cyrus Cylinder housed in the British Museum records Cyrus the Persian's attack on Babylon.

The breast and arms of silver (Media-Persia) were overcome by a third empire of brass. The Medes and Persians ruled from 539 B.C. until they were defeated by the Greeks in 331 B.C. Daniel 8 describes the Greeks by name as vanquishing the Media-Persians. Both the Scriptures and history agree. The Greeks ruled from 331 B.C. to 168 B.C., when they were defeated by the iron monarchy of Rome.

It was during the Roman rule of the Caesars that Jesus was born. A Roman governor tried Jesus, and Roman soldiers crucified Him. The Romans ruled from 168 B.C. to approximately A.D. 351.

Four metals: gold, silver, brass, and iron; four dominant kingdoms: Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. Did a fifth world-ruling empire overthrow Rome? No. Rome, having decayed from within, was overcome by the Germanic barbarian tribes from the north. Listen to these remarkable words from the prophecy: "Whereas you saw the feet and toes, partly of potter's clay and partly of iron, the kingdom shall be divided" (Dan. 2:41).

The Roman Empire was divided, and remains divided until this day. The prophecy continues: "They will not adhere to one another, just as iron does not mix with clay" (verse 43). Would-be world rulers have tried to revive the Roman Empire. But each passing century marks the fulfillment of this ancient prophecy. It comes to an incredible climax in Daniel 2:44: "And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever."

According to this remarkable prophecy the next event on heaven's timetable is Jesus Christ, the Rock of Ages, that Rock cut out without hands (verses 34, 35) setting up His eternal, everlasting kingdom.

The Central Theme Repeated

Each successive prophecy throughout the 12 chapters of Daniel repeats the central theme of the earlier chapters and enlarges upon it. In Daniel 2 God uses the symbol of four metals to describe four mighty kingdoms. In Daniel 7 the four beasts are

A Little Horn Power

By Mark Finley

Up to Daniel 7:7 we see political powers attempting to usurp God's rightful position as the one who truly reigns over this earth. But as we come to Daniel 7:8, a "little horn" power—a power that begins small but is catapulted into world dominance—grows quietly out of Rome. According to the prophecy, this power has "eyes like the eyes of a man" (verse 8). Eyes in the Bible are a symbol of wisdom or understanding (Eph. 1:18). The authority of this power is human, not divine. It would ultimately "cast truth down to the ground" (Dan. 8:12).

This little horn power would "speak pompous words," "persecute the saints of the Most High," "intend to change times and law" (Dan. 7:25), and would be "different" (verse 23) from all other political powers mentioned in this chapter. Prophecy indicates this power is religious and not political (verses 24, 25). A counterfeit political religious system then arises out of Rome, attempting to usurp God's authority by changing God's law. God's answer to the challenge of the little horn is His final judgment (verses 21, 22).

The little horn appears religious, but it is not. The judgment sweeps away all pretense, exposes all falsity. It reveals all hypocrisy. Catch the triumphant tone of the final verses of this amazing prophecy: "But the court shall be seated, and they shall take away his dominion, to consume and destroy it forever. Then the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people, the saints of the Most High. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey Him" (verses 26, 27).

symbolic of the same four nations. In Daniel 2 the fourth metal, iron, has 10 toes. In Daniel 7 the fourth beast has 10 horns.

According to Daniel 7:17, “those great beasts, which are four, are four kings which arise out of the earth.” The fact that each beast in Daniel 7 represents a kingdom is made clear in verse 23: “The fourth beast shall be a fourth kingdom on the earth, which shall be different from all other kingdoms.” God pictured these beasts rising up out of the sea on a fiercely stormy night in the midst of mighty winds. In Bible prophecy the sea or water represents people (Rev. 17:15). Wind represents destruction, devastation, and disaster (Jer. 49:36, 37). Daniel’s prophecy predicts nations arising amid the conflict of war and strife.

The first beast, the lion with eagle’s wings (Dan. 7:4), is an accurate description of the nation of Babylon. Archaeologists have discovered this “lion with eagle’s wings” symbol on the walls of Babylon and on coins excavated from Babylon’s ruins.

The Medes and Persians were aptly described in the ruthlessness of a bear with three bloody ribs in its mouth (verse 5). In order for the Medes and Persians to dominate the Middle East they conquered three nations—Babylon, Lydia, and Egypt. As the prophecy describes, they devoured three ribs.

The swiftness of Alexander the Great’s conquests is graphically revealed in the symbolism of a winged leopard (verse 6). God pictured this leopard as having four heads. Why? When Alexander died, his four generals took over his empire. Rather than battle one another for his throne, Cassander, Lysimachus, Ptolemy, and Seleucus divided the territory of the Greek Empire among themselves.

The fourth beast is pictured as incredibly fierce and amazingly powerful with huge iron teeth (verse 7). The image of Daniel 2 has 10 toes. The “dreadful” beast of Daniel 7 has 10 horns (verse 7). Like the 10 toes, the ten horns symbolize the divisions of the Roman Empire. It is at this point in the prophecy that God introduces a completely new element (see sidebar).

The Visions of John

The aged apostle John, a prisoner on the rocky, barren island of Patmos, joyfully writes, “Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him” (Rev. 1:7). John longed for the day when he could sing with the redeemed of all ages: “Blessing and honor and glory and power be to Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever!” (Rev. 5:13).

The prophecies of Daniel and Revelation focus on much more than cryptic symbols, bloodthirsty beasts, dreadful dragons, and the antichrist’s mark. They speak of Jesus and His everlasting kingdom. In Revelation 7 John looks beyond all of earth’s coming sorrows to this magnificent scene: “Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple. And He who sits on the throne will dwell among them” (Rev. 7:15).

Along with Daniel the prophecies of Revelation graphically describe the destruction of all evil forces at the coming of our Lord. John pictures God's "sickle" destroying all sin and sinners in Revelation 14:19, 20. In the glorious triumph of the coming of our Lord portrayed in Revelation 19, John sees heaven open. Jesus Christ, symbolized as a conquering general riding a white horse, returns. The beast and the false prophet and all those who oppose, oppress, and persecute God's people are "cast alive into the lake of fire burning with brimstone" (Rev. 19:20). Jesus is exalted as "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Rev. 19:16).

In Revelation 20 John depicts a desolate earth with Satan bound and the wicked destroyed for 1,000 years (verses 1-3). During this 1,000 years, which some Bible students term "the millennium," the redeemed (the saved) who have been caught up to meet Christ in the air at His return (John 14:1-3; 1 Thess. 4:16, 17) reign with Jesus in heaven (Rev. 20:4). As heaven's books are opened, the saved see clearly that God's love has done everything possible to save every person.

At the conclusion of these 1,000 years the Holy City descends from heaven to earth. The wicked dead are resurrected. Satan leads these legions of the lost to attack the Holy City (verses 5, 7, 8). The cleansing fire of the presence of God descends from heaven, and devours sin and sinners forever, and God's holiness purifies the earth.

John describes this overwhelming, breathtaking, magnificent scene this way: "Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, 'Behold the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and there shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away'" (Rev. 21:2-4).

What a hope! What a destiny! What a bright picture of tomorrow! Beyond our heartaches, sorrows and tears, Jesus will come. Beyond the disasters and tribulation, Jesus will come—not secretly or silently. He will come as King of kings. He will come as Lord of lords. He will come as the mighty conqueror. He will come to reign eternally, and the whole world will know it!