

"DISCERNING THE TIMES"

(Matthew 16:3)

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What This Bible Study is All About....

Throughout the world there is a growing sense that "something is about to happen." Never before in human history has Earth teetered on the brink of such globally perilous times. We are the first generation possessing the capacity to destroy all life. Widespread travel can now transform localized epidemics into pandemic disaster. Global financial networks have created a situation where national economies rise and fall based on world economic conditions. Environmental and natural disasters seem to underscore the turbulence of our times.

Television, radio, movies, magazines and newspapers, and even weather reports, are saturated with stories of prophetic significance. One cannot go through a supermarket checkout line without being visually inundated by "end time prophecies for inquiring minds."

The crescendo of voices foretelling the future is rising. While some predict a golden age of unprecedented glory, most are foreboding cries of impending disaster and despair.

With so many voices crying out, which ones should be heeded? Is it even possible to know the future? Where can the truth be found? What is going to happen next in our world? How can we understand the times in which we are living? What should we be doing to prepare for the future?

As believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, we know that God's Word is the basis of truth. This study is designed to lead the student through Scripture, into an accurate understanding of what God reveals about the future.

Chronologically approaching biblical prophecy, we will begin with a broad overview of God's plan in human history, then systematically focus on specific future events, and finally look at our present world in an effort to discern where we may be on God's prophetic timetable.

It is recommended that this study guide be used as a "working file", inserting other relevant materials into the appropriate chapter as time goes by.

Indeed, "something is about to happen." It is our prayer that this journey through God's Word in the coming weeks will develop our personal discernment, infuse in our hearts "the highways to Zion" (*Psalm 84:5*), and fill us with a daily passion to see Jesus face to face. Maranatha!

Dave and Judy Gerry

WEEK 1

PREPARING FOR THE JOURNEY

*"How blessed is the man whose strength is in Thee;
In whose heart are the highways to Zion."
(Psalm 84:5)*

INTRODUCTION

Life is a journey, and the Creator allows each man to select his own path. The most well-traveled path leads to destruction, while a narrow path leads to life (*Matthew 7:13, 14*). All believers are walking the narrow path and share the same destination... Zion.

Zion is where God Himself dwells. All believers in Jesus Christ are destined to live in the glorious presence of the Lord forever (*John 14:2*). The city of Zion is often referred to as Jerusalem, particularly as the New Jerusalem (*Revelation 21:3*).

Believers are all "marching to Zion," as the old hymn says. God, in His mercy, has blessed us by placing in our hearts the highways to Zion (*Psalm 84:5*). Our hearts are being pulled toward being in the presence of the Lord.

Followers of the Lord Jesus Christ know that they are "aliens and sojourners" on Earth (*1 Peter 2:11*). As "strangers and exiles," believers anticipate with joy "the city that He has prepared for them" (*Hebrews 11:13, 16*) where they will be forever with Jesus. The Holy Spirit resides in believers' hearts, and He continually turns our hearts toward home ... Zion.

This Bible study is designed to explore those "highways to Zion." Where are we going as believers? What can we expect to encounter as we travel this highway? As we come closer to the time of the return of the Lord, what will we see happening around us? How can we tell if we have gotten off-track?

The Lord has provided for us the holy Bible that is our roadmap. Through biblical prophecy, God has foretold what we will encounter along this road which leads to Christ's return. Scripture is replete with awesome and specific predictions, descriptions, and even timetables to watch.

This study is designed to:

- rejoice in learning more about God's character,
- focus our attention upon our eternal destination,
- teach us how to accurately use our "map,"
- help us to ascertain our current prophetic location,

- equip us to victoriously take this journey without losing our way,
- stimulate us to encourage fellow believers,
- and exhort us to reach out to those who don't know Christ.

Prophecy is not a speedbump on the highway to delay us in our Christian walk. Prophecy is not a roadblock to stop us, nor is it a detour to divert us. Prophecy is a description of the road we're on. It helps to keep us on track, giving us an appreciation of "**the journey**" as well as "**the destination**".

Through prophecy, God has written His name across the pages of past, present and future history. As the Author of time and eternity, prophecy is the **signature of God**.

In this new millennium there is great interest in prophecy, the paranormal, and the supernatural. Television shows appear daily promising to reveal hidden mysteries or revelations. Magazine sales flourish as they headline ancient and new prophecies regarding the future.

Prophecy is extremely important to God, but not all "prophecy" is "created equal." Before embarking on our journey through prophetic truth in order to reach Zion we must become acquainted with the rules of the road.

I. THE RULES OF THE ROAD

A. Christ Himself is the Road

We cannot understand the meaning of biblical prophecy unless we know Christ personally. Our focus in studying prophecy is not on "when," but on "**Who**" is coming!

- 1. John 14:6** How does Jesus describe Himself?
- 2. I Corinthians 14:22** Prophecy is a sign for what particular group of people?
(Are you a part of that group?)
- 3. I Corinthians 1:22-24** How did God reveal His wisdom?
(Have you personally encountered this revelation of God's wisdom?)
- 4. I Corinthians 2:6-15** Who is able to understand the things of God?
- 5. Daniel 12:3, 10** How are those who have insight (wisdom) described?

6. **James 1:5** How can we get more wisdom? (Would you like more?)
7. **Revelation 19:10** What is the distinguishing mark of all true prophecy?

B. God's Word is our Map: It Shows the Route and Destination

As we attempt to discern the times in which we are living, the Bible will be our foundation and basis. We will attempt not to hold historical and current events up and force Scripture to fit them, rather we will hold up Scripture and seek to determine whether or not events fit the Scriptures.

8. **II Timothy 3:16-17** Are some portions of Scripture more inspired by God than others? What parts of Scripture are good for us to study? (Does that include prophetic texts?)
9. **II Timothy 2:15** Who is supposed to "read the map?"

How would you rate yourself in this area?

10. **I Thessalonians 4:13-5:1** Regarding what issue(s) was Paul concerned that the church not be uninformed?

How informed would you say that you are on this issue?

C. God's Word Defines the Rules of the Road:

Proper interpretation of prophetic signs, terms and symbols are to be found in Scripture itself. (The best

commentary on the Word of God is the Word of God!)

11. II Peter 1:20-21 How did all Scriptural prophecy originate?

In order to accurately interpret Scripture ("hermeneutics") we must be diligent to carefully consider the historical, cultural, contextual, theological, and literary elements of each passage. The theological term for prophetic studies is "eschatology".

II. WHY STUDY PROPHECY?

Few believers feel that they have an accurate and adequate knowledge of biblical prophecy. Why do you think that in the Church today there are so relatively few individuals who have studied biblical prophecy?

A. Roadblocks to Studying Prophecy:

Put a checkmark beside any "Roadblocks" that you have experienced in your own life from the list below:

- Satan discourages us from knowing God's Word.
- False teachers tell us prophecy is useless.
- Prophecy is thought to be only for "expert theologians."
- Historically, incorrect interpretations breed cults.
- Prophecy is viewed as sensational and "trendy."
- Basic fear of what the future holds.
- Prophetic study may distract from true spirituality. (Danger of becoming "so heavenly-minded that you're no earthly good.")
- It doesn't matter. What's the point? We'll all be with Jesus in the end anyway, so why study?
- Prophecy is associated with the mentally unstable, or fringe groups.
- It takes too much work and time to learn prophecy, or to study God's Word.

Can you think of any other reasons that hinder believers from studying the prophetic Word?

B. Reasons for Studying Prophecy - Heeding Prophecy Pleases God the Father:

12. Isaiah 42:8-9 What brings God glory and praise?

13. Isaiah 41:21-26 God is challenging idols and false gods to do something. What can

He alone do that gives Him credibility?

14. **Isaiah 46:8-11** What can God do that no other god can do?

C. Reason for Studying Prophecy – It Pleases the Lord Jesus:

15. **Matthew 24:15** What is the reader to understand?

16. **Matthew 24:24, 25** Whose prophetic words are we to heed?

17. **Matthew 16:1-3** Why did Christ reprimand the Pharisees?

18. **Luke 19:41-44** Why was Jesus weeping?

When the disciples asked Christ for precise details regarding His Second Coming, He did not answer, "It is not for you to know," nor was He at all vague. His response was immediate and extensive (*Mark 13:4-37*).

Immediately prior to His death, Jesus' final urgent message was regarding the signs of His coming and of the end of the age (*Matthew 24:4 - 25:46*). Prophecy was very important to our Lord.

D. Reason for Studying Prophecy - The Apostles Exhorted Us to Study the Prophetic Word:

19. **I Thessalonians 4:13-18** Who wrote this letter? Of what does he not want us to be uninformed?

20. **II Peter 1:19** Who wrote this letter? To what are we to pay attention?

II. ISRAEL: GOD'S KEY TO THE MAP

In this conflict of the ages, it is essential to realize that Israel is the "key" to understanding the map of God's Word. Every map has a "key" which is used to provide perspective on what you are seeing. A clear picture of how Israel fits into God's plan for the ages is essential in order to gain an accurate perspective of biblical prophecy.

1. **Genesis 12:1-3** What did God promise Abram?

2. **Genesis 15:18-21** What did God promise Abram?

According to God's covenant, His promises to Abraham were unconditional (*Genesis 15:8-17*) and were unconditionally affirmed to Abraham's son Isaac (*Genesis 26:1-4*), and to Abraham's grandson Jacob (*Genesis 28:10-15*). All Israelites were the offspring of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

3. **Deuteronomy 26:18** What is God's relationship to Israel?

4. **II Samuel 7:12-16; Jeremiah 33:14-17** What does God promise David?

5. **Zechariah 2:8** Even in disobedience, what does God call Israel?

6. **Jeremiah 29:11** Even in disobedience, what does God have for Israel?

Satan was aware that God would send a Redeemer through the woman's seed (*Genesis 3:15*). This Redeemer would come through the line of Abraham (*Genesis 15:5*) and He would be Christ (*Galatians 3:16*). In an attempt to foil God's plan, Satan has attempted to destroy Israel. The nation of Israel has endured three major dispersions and unspeakable suffering over the course of human history.

7. **Jeremiah 31:35-37** In spite of national dispersion (*Jeremiah 24:10*) and wandering among the nations (*Hosea 9:17*), what will Israel always be before God?

The promises made to Abraham were unconditional. That is, Abraham and the Jewish nation did not have to fulfill any requirements in order for God to keep His promises to them. Yet, many of the promises that God made to Israel through Moses were indeed conditional.

8. Deuteronomy 28:1-14 What blessings does God promise Israel?

What were the conditions of this promise?

9. Deuteronomy 28:15-28 What curses does God promise will happen to Israel?

Which of these things have happened to Israel?

10. I Kings 9:8, 9 What will happen to Israel and why?

11. Jeremiah 24:9; Hosea 9:17 What will happen to Israel?

12. Romans 11:11, 29 Has God forsaken Israel today?

13. Isaiah 11:11 What does God say will happen to Israel?

Have you seen any evidence of this previously in Israel's history?

- 14. Ezekiel 37:1-14** Describe what Ezekiel saw.

Two stages of national new life are described here. What are they?

If you had to pinpoint a verse describing where Israel is today from this passage, where would that be in the "dry bones" scenario?

If God loves Israel so much, why does He allow her to suffer so? Based on the following texts, how will God's purposes be accomplished through Israel's suffering?

- 15. Ezekiel 39:21**

Ezekiel 39:22

Ezekiel 39:26, 27

Ezekiel 39:28

Israel has suffered at Satan's hands, by God's permissive will, and has suffered because of her own sin. Regardless of the source of her suffering, how should believers respond to Israel?

- 16. Romans 11:18, 25** What should Gentile believers be careful to avoid in their attitude toward the Jews?

- 17. Genesis 12:3** What should be our response toward Israel and Jewish people?

Is that your heart's response? What could you do to change, or improve, your acts and attitudes of blessing the Jews?

HOMEWORK #2

ISRAEL

There are three key analogies that refer to Israel in biblical prophecy:

- the vine
- the fig tree
- the olive tree

I. THE VINE IS A SYMBOL OF ISRAEL'S SPIRITUAL PRIVILEGE:

1. **Psalm 80:8-11** What is being described here?

Do you note any geographical boundaries?

What actual places might these be?

2. **Isaiah 5:1-7** What does the vineyard represent?

Who did all the work in the vineyard?

Was the cultivation effort sufficient?

Did the crop turn out as expected by the vinekeeper?

What happened to the crop?

(Read Jeremiah 2:21-23) Why do you think that the crop failed?

What did the vinekeeper do as a result?

Do you see evidence of this in Israel's past history?

3. **Matthew 21:33-43** Who are the vine-growers in this analogy?

What do you think that it means when Jesus says that the vineyard is "rented?"

Who are the slaves in verses 34-36?

What, and Who, is being described in verses 37-39?

II. THE FIG TREE IS A SYMBOL OF ISRAEL'S NATIONAL PRIVILEGE:

1. **Matthew 21:18-20.** In this passage Jesus cursed the fig tree that was lacking the fruit that it should have produced.
2. **Mark 11:12-14.** Here Jesus curses a fig tree for its deceptive character since it should have had some fruit on it from the previous season. This was representative of Israel's hypocrisy. (*See also Matthew 23:1-33*)
3. **Luke 13:6-9.** In this parable of the "Barren Fig Tree" the owner of the vineyard came to check for fruit on the fig tree. He looked for three years (corresponding to Christ's 3 year ministry) for fruit without finding any. He therefore decided to cut down the tree, that is, remove the nation from the vineyard.
4. **Hosea 9:10.** Who was the earliest fruit on the fig tree?
5. **Matthew 24:32-34** What do you think that this passage means?

III. THE OLIVE TREE IS A SYMBOL OF ISRAEL'S RELIGIOUS PRIVILEGE:

1. **Jeremiah 11:16, 17** What is Israel called?

Why were the branches to be broken off?

2. **Romans 11:17-27** What two olive trees are discussed here?

What do each of these two trees represent?

What, if anything, does this tell you about how Israel and the Church fit together?

Now, without looking, fill in the following blanks!

In prophecy, **the vine** represents

In prophecy, **the fig tree** represents

In prophecy, **the olive tree** represents