

Christ in Prophecy

Prophecy 41: Tommy Ice on the Interpretation of Bible Prophecy

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Opening

Dr. Reagan: Does Bible prophecy ever mean what it says, or is it always symbolic in nature? And if it is only symbolic, how can we ever know when it's fulfilled? If the First Coming prophecies about Jesus were literal, then shouldn't the Second Coming prophecies be interpreted literally? For the answers to these questions and others regarding the interpretation of Bible prophecy, stay tuned.

Part 1

Dr. Reagan: Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Blessed Hope, and welcome to Christ in Prophecy. I had the opportunity recently to sit down with a renowned expert of Bible prophecy and talk with him about how Bible prophecy should be interpreted. Folks, this is a very vital question, since most churches in the world today take the position that the Bible's prophecies about the Second Coming of Jesus should be spiritualized and not be taken literally.

The expert that I had the opportunity to interview is Dr. Tommy Ice, the director of the Pre-Trib Study Center located in the Dallas, Texas area. Dr. Ice has co-authored over 30 books, he has written hundreds of articles, and is a frequent conference speaker. He has a Master of Theology degree from Dallas Theological Seminary and a Ph.D. from Tyndale Theological Seminary. He has served as a pastor before becoming the Director of the Pre-Trib Research Center in 1994. Dr. Ice and his wife, Janice, have three grown sons.

Now, don't let all those academic credentials scare you because Dr. Ice is a down-to-earth communicator, and you will be enlightened by what he has to say about how to interpret the Bible, and particularly Bible prophecy.

Interview with Tommy Ice

Dr. Reagan: Tommy when I was growing up in the church I heard something over, and over about the interpretation of Bible prophecy. And it was that the Bible means exactly what it says from beginning to end unless it is talking about the Second Coming of Jesus, it never means what it says because that is apocalyptic literature. And apocalyptic literature is a special genre of its own that must always be interpreted symbolically.

Tommy Ice: Right, and what they were doing was what we call apocalyptic genre override. They are using a genre classification to override literal interpretation.

Dr. Reagan: It's a good way to put it I've never heard that. Yeah.

Tommy Ice: Robert Thomas coined that term. And first of all the word apocalyptic as you know is apocalypse, it's the first word in the book of Revelation and it means "revelation". Not to hide or cover. Secondly the book of Revelation at least twice, and I think up to four times calls itself not apocalyptic but prophecy.

Dr. Reagan: Prophecy that's right.

Tommy Ice: Yes. And this back in the 70's I remember conservatives used the word apocalyptic literature and what they meant by it was prophecy that had visions and symbols in it. Now, that's not how it's being used today, the liberal view has overtaken it. And the liberals believe that apocalyptic genre was developed in the Intertestamental Period. You know, well, so Ezekiel and Daniel were said to be apocalyptic what does that do? That means you have to take a liberal view of the Bible, you know, to have it fit into there. Usually it's always pseudonymical; in other words either it doesn't have an author on there or it is said to be a false name. Well that doesn't fit the book of Revelation. Doesn't fit the book of Daniel. Doesn't fit the book of Ezekiel you see. So they had this saying and then they--so what they do is they just come in and say, "Well it is apocalyptic, and everybody knows you can't take it literally." Rather than getting in and doing what some would call hand-to-hand exegetical combat. In other words taking the verse and reading the Bible and understanding what it means. And so, that is just a quick way because they cannot handle individual text to simply dismiss it and move on.

Dr. Reagan: Well, I was confronted with this time and time again, and I'd say something to somebody and they would say, "Oh that is apocalyptic. That is apocalyptic. It doesn't mean what it says." And one time I was reading through the book of Zechariah and I came to chapter 14 and it was so easy to understand. I mean it just said, "In the end times Jerusalem is going to be surrounded by enemies. The Lord is going to come, His foot is going to touch the Mount of Olives. The Mount of Olives will split in half. He'll speak a supernatural word, the enemy is destroyed. Verse 9, He'll become King over all the earth." Well I grew up in an Amillennial church and I went to the pastor and said, "What about this?" He read it and read it, and he said, "It doesn't mean what it says because that is apocalyptic." But one day what I did was I read the entire book of Zechariah, a little short book doesn't take long.

Tommy Ice: Big mistake.

Dr. Reagan: But you know what I discovered? And you don't have to be a rocket scientist. I discovered that every prophecy in that book concerning the First Coming of Jesus meant what it said. And I decided hey, if the First Coming prophecies mean what they say, the Second Coming prophecies must mean what they say.

Tommy Ice: Zechariah 9:9, He is going to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey.

Dr. Reagan: Yeah, right. Right. And it just made no sense to me to say, "Well First Coming prophecies mean what they say, the Second Coming don't mean what they say."

Tommy Ice: Exactly.

Dr. Reagan: People love to interpret the Bible, all of it that way because when you interpret the Bible in that way you can make it say anything you want it to say.

Tommy Ice: That's true.

Dr. Reagan: You become god.

Tommy Ice: Sure. But that shows the importance of context. In other words--

Dr. Reagan: Yeah, talk about that.

Tommy Ice: Context, when I was in Seminary they called it the hermeneutical cheer. Hermeneutical means interpretation. And so they would go, context, context, context, just like Real Estate is location, location, location. And so, you know, I remember before I--when I was young put it that way we used to sit under a tree and do Bible studies. And I would study for it

and I had a Bible dictionary that defined words and everything. And I would go through maybe sometimes 20-25 and I would pick the one I liked the best. And then later I learned you are supposed to study what word nuance of this word fits the context. So you read the context to figure out is that referring to a physical departure, or an idea, like departing from the faith you see. So, the context is key, it is sovereign. We have the English word run, it has many possibilities. In other words run to the store. He scored a run. There is a run of salmon. She has a run in her stockings. When I was in the military after we ate breakfast sometimes we had the runs. But each nuance is clear in a context because I just gave you five different contexts.

Dr. Reagan: That's right.

Tommy Ice: And it's always clear. And so the context determines whether you have what we call denotative or connotative meaning plain literal, or figurative literal. And every word or phrase in all languages are that way. And so if it's a figure of speech, which there are figures of speech all over the Bible. And we--I mean you can't watch a sporting event in America without hearing all kinds of figures of speech. He killed the quarterback. Well when's his funeral? You know?

Dr. Reagan: That's right. Well I always think of two sentences using the same phrase white house. Today I toured the White House. That is literal. Another sentence the White House announced today. Well the White House can't talk. It's obvious the context that's symbolic. So the context determines whether it is symbolic or literal. And there can be times when it may not be perfectly clear, but usually it is.

Tommy Ice: Right. Yeah, that's why you back up and read the broader context and things. So, words are limited by context, nuances. And symbols for example the book of Revelation I think I've heard 34-39 symbols in the book of Revelation, half of them are explained in the context. He says, "The seven candle lampstands are the seven churches." Duh.

Dr. Reagan: Duh. I know.

Tommy Ice: He says, "The seven stars are seven angels." Duh. You know, and then he talks like in Revelation 12 about the red dragon. And then five or six verses later he says it's Satan.

Dr. Reagan: That's right.

Tommy Ice: He tells you.

Dr. Reagan: And you know even if the Bible doesn't explain the symbol the Bible is its own best interpreter. So for example in Revelation 13 it refers to a woman with these stars and all. Well, all you have to do is get a concordance and look that up and you can find it in the Old Testament perfectly explained. It's Israel.

Tommy Ice: Yes, that is Revelation 12.

Dr. Reagan: Yeah, I'm sorry Revelation 12, yeah.

Tommy Ice: Yes, it is in Genesis 37.

Dr. Reagan: Yeah.

Tommy Ice: And he has the dream. The only time you have sun, moon and stars used together it always referred to Israel, exactly and the 12 tribes. Yeah, so you don't drop a tab of LSD and hallucinate. You know and try to come up. Or have a group think thing. What do you think it means? What do you think it means? No, you study the context. So, in order to

understand symbols in the Bible you just have to know the whole Bible, you know in the book of Revelation. And it's not that hard.

Dr. Reagan: For example it says in the book of Revelation that Israel is going to be delivered from the Antichrist on the wings of a great eagle.

Tommy Ice: Yes.

Dr. Reagan: And there have been books written about that in which they say, "Well, there is the United States we are going to provide the end time airlift of the Jewish people." And yet that very same terminology is used in the Old Testament about the coming of Egypt.

Tommy Ice: It's used in Exodus, and Deuteronomy.

Dr. Reagan: Yes, all it means is you are coming out under the protection of God.

Tommy Ice: I thought that was George W. Bush and the Texas Air National Guard myself.

Dr. Reagan: Well I don't know it is just amazing. I had a guy tell me one time, "I can prove to you that in the book of Revelation chapter 20 where it says Jesus is going to reign for 1,000 years." It says it six times. He says, "I can prove to you it doesn't mean 1,000 years." I said, "Ok, how's that?" He said, "Well go over to Psalms," I think it was Psalm 50, "What does it say? God owns the cattle on 1,000 hills. Are there only 1,000 hills?" Thousand is used symbolically.

Tommy Ice: Right. Have you ever read the next line? It says, "He owns everything."

Dr. Reagan: But you know it's the context.

Tommy Ice: I know at that is a symbolic usage it is very clear.

Dr. Reagan: Context. Context.

Tommy Ice: And they want to transfer--here's another error one scholar calls it illegitimate totality transfer, where you go over to another to a passage like "He owns the cattle on a 1,000" and you import that meaning into the context of say Revelation 20. I'm sorry, you are defining--that's not the context. You are importing that in.

Dr. Reagan: That's right.

Tommy Ice: That is a symbolic use. But on the other hand in Revelation 20 that is a historical narrative, and it's really not much symbols going on there.

Part 2

Dr. Reagan: Before we proceeded with my discussion with Dr. Tommy Ice about the interpretation of Bible prophecy, I would like to give you a special treat namely, a song by our featured vocalist, Jack Hollingsworth. The song I have in mind is the one that you, our viewers, have most frequently requested. It is called, "11:59" which is a reference to the fact that the hour is late because the Lord is about to return any moment. Here now is Jack Hollingsworth singing "11:59."

Jack Hollingsworth:

Time is winding down
Just look around us
Evil's breaking lose

On every side
The devil knows his time is almost over
Soon the clock will stop
And Jesus Christ will split the sky
Shout it from the rooftops
Proclaim it in the streets
Tell your friends and neighbors
Tell everyone you meet
We all need a Savior
But we're running out of time
He's coming back at midnight
It's 11:59.

God's prepared a place
For all his children
Free from fears and doubt
Tears and pain
We must choose our destination
You know there's just one way to heaven
Jesus is his name
Shout it from the rooftops
Proclaim it in the streets
Tell your friends and neighbors
Tell everyone you meet
We all need a Savior
But we're running out of time
Yes, He's coming back at midnight
It's 11:59.

And at the right hand of the Father
He'll soon stand to His feet
And He'll say "Son go get the children
And bring them home to me."
So shout it from the rooftops
Proclaim it in the streets
Tell your friends and neighbors
Tell everyone you meet
That we all need a Savior
But we're running out of time
Yes, He's coming back at midnight
It's 11:59.

Church, Jesus is coming back
Time as we know it is almost over
He's coming back for a bride
Without spot or wrinkle
One who's ready to go
It's almost midnight
It's 11:59.

Part 3

Dr. Reagan: Well another problem that people run into is not considering all the relevant verses on a particular topic. Let me give you an example here that I'd like for you to comment on. It's over in 2 Peter and you'll find it there in chapter 3. 2 Peter 3:10 where it says, "The Day of the Lord will come like a thief in which the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat and the earth and its works will be burned up." Ok. Jesus will come. The earth will be burned up. There is no Millennium. Well you can't base, you know, this on one verse. You have to read everything the Bible says about it.

Tommy Ice: Well and reading this verse should start by reading the context.

Dr. Reagan: That's true.

Tommy Ice: What's the context of 2 Peter 3? It's the scoffers says, "All things have continued as they were from the beginning of Creation and God's not going to intervene in history." And so he is saying well he intervened at Creation. He intervened at the Flood. He was going to intervene at the Second Coming. So he is talking about God intervening in history and this is another example of I guess you could say a fourth example, he says that at the end of history God is going to intervene and He is going to destroy the heavens and earth, so he is not talking about the Millennium. You know?

Dr. Reagan: But you are not going to find all of the end time events in any one particular passage.

Tommy Ice: No.

Dr. Reagan: That's why you have to work at this. And incidentally that is something really is one of my pet peeves is when pastors will tell me, "I am not Pre-Millennial. I'm not Post-Millennial. I'm just Pan-Millennial; it's all going to work out in the end. To me that is admission of laziness. In other words I'm not going to study this and really find out what it says.

Tommy Ice: Yeah, I mean God can't talk? He who made the mouth not speak clearly. You know they are saying--I mean goodness there is so much information on that in the Bible.

Dr. Reagan: Yes. Right.

Tommy Ice: You're right it is that. In fact I remember a debate I had with a Preterist at Biola University I started the debate off by saying that Pan-Millennial view and said, "What makes you think it already happened?" See that's the Preterist view.

Dr. Reagan: Yes, it all happened in 70 AD.

Tommy Ice: It's not going to pan out in the end, it's already panned out in AD 70. You know. So see you can't be neutral or passive on that. Now I understand if you are learning, you're growing, you're studying and you haven't yet reached conclusions on some of these things, that's different than somebody that just blows it off.

Dr. Reagan: That's right. Let me ask you something else what about telescoping? What is telescoping and what are the problems with that?

Tommy Ice: Well, in biblical interpretation it refers to the fact that God has revealed in the Old Testament different passages and He has--it's like looking at a mountain range and you see the peaks but you can't really see from a distance the valleys in between. But if you were to go walk this it would take a long time and you would go up and down, and up and down and you would get a different view. So, some have tried to, and I like this view that the valleys refer to the mysteries of the New Testament like the Church Age, it wasn't revealed. It was part of God's plan. Those valleys have always been there. But from a distance in the Old Testament all you're

seeing is these prophecies. And even that some of them refer to the First Coming of Christ and some refer to the Second Coming of Christ.

Dr. Reagan: Yes.

Tommy Ice: And I think it is in Zechariah chapter 9 where you have--

Dr. Reagan: Zechariah 9:9.

Tommy Ice: Yes. And here he talks about, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation, humble and mounted on a donkey, even a colt, the foal of a donkey."

Dr. Reagan: There's the First Coming.

Tommy Ice: And that's First Coming. And then the very next verse it says, I think it refers to the Second Coming, "And I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim; and the horse from Jerusalem; and the bow of war will be cut off. And He will speak peace to the nations; and His dominion will be from sea to sea, and from River to ends of the earth." And so this is talking about the career over all career if you want to look at it that way of the Messiah of the King. And it's got two phases once we get the New Testament we can realize that. That's His First Coming in humiliation. A donkey how humiliating to ride a donkey. And then secondly He is going to come victoriously. And so sometimes--

Dr. Reagan: This is one of the most difficult things about interpreting prophecy. Isaiah 9, "A Child will be born to us, a Son will be given to us." First Coming. And then not even a different sentence, the sentence continues. "And the government will rest upon His shoulders." Well you jump from the First Coming to the Second Coming there. Exactly, because it's certainly not on His shoulders now. If He is He's doing a very poor job of it.

Tommy Ice: Yeah, I always say, "If this is the Millennium or God's Kingdom then we must be on the ghetto side."

Dr. Reagan: That's right.

Tommy Ice: But then I realize there is no ghetto in His Kingdom. But oh, well.

Dr. Reagan: So that's just one of the things you have to watch in prophecy is that when the prophets look in the future he may talk about some events, but they not necessarily be just one right immediately after the other. There may be a gap between them.

Tommy Ice: Well you know when I found when I studied the book of Revelation, the book of Revelation John is told to write down what he sees. And I think 39 times he says, "And I saw. And I saw. And I saw." Eleven or twelve times, "I hear." So he is taking dictation and notes at those points. And what he does is he gives a verbal description of the visions that he's seeing. And under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit there is at least 550 allusions to Old Testament passages.

Dr. Reagan: That's right.

Tommy Ice: So, John provides a chronology. I think a broad chronology. And you are able to come in and take all those Old Testament prophet passages that are scattered throughout and organize them into some degree of a chronology.

Dr. Reagan: Well one of my favorite quotations about interpretation comes from Morris--

Tommy Ice: Henry.

Dr. Reagan: Henry Morris the founder of the Institute for Creation Research. He wrote a book called, "Revelation Record," and in the introduction he said, "The reason I am writing this book is because people tell me the book of Revelation is difficult to understand." He said, "They are wrong it's not difficult to understand, it's difficult to believe. If you will believe it you will understand it."

Tommy Ice: Good point. That's the problem really.

Dr. Reagan: Yeah, I know. One time I went to a seminary library, seminary library at TCU and I looked in something like 80 different commentaries to see what they had to say about Revelation chapter 7 and about the 144,000. And about 85% of them said it was talking about the church.

Tommy Ice: Sure.

Dr. Reagan: What would God have to do to convince us He is talking about 144,000 Jews? He names them by tribes.

Tommy Ice: Right. You're right.

Dr. Reagan: And yet they say, "Oh, no this is talking about the Church."

Tommy Ice: Right. Well that's because their big ideas that they bring to the text override the meaning what it actual says.

Dr. Reagan: Override what the texts says.

Tommy Ice: Yes. And that let's come back full circle here. You know that's the point. It took the Church a couple of thousand years to consistently develop and interpret the Bible in a consistently literal way. And that's why only in the last 200 years you've had Dispensationalism and Pretribulationism become dominant.

Dr. Reagan: Yes.

Tommy Ice: It's progress of the Church's understanding, because He says the Holy Spirit will be with us and guide us and direct us during the Church Age. And you see that, you know if you have any--I have some background in Church History and you see that progress of dogma as James Orr called it being developed as the Church increasingly understands the Bible.

Dr. Reagan: Right.

Tommy Ice: And one other thing, you talked about interpreting with all these complicated things. But you know you have to take every passage into consideration. And our goal in interpretation is to come up with a view that coordinates all of the views. In other words all the information that is put in, all the Scripture so that we have it in interpretation that doesn't contradict anything.

Dr. Reagan: Yes.

Tommy Ice: And for example Pretribulationism is true because it's the best thing when you consider all the passages and issue involved it's the best explanation for what's going on.

Closing

Dr. Reagan: Folks, the bottom line when it comes to the interpretation of the Bible is to follow the rule that when the plain sense makes sense, don't look for any other sense, lest you end up with nonsense.

Well, folks, that's our program for today. I hope it has been a blessing to you, and, the Lord willing, I hope you will be back with us next week. Until then, this is Dave Reagan speaking for Lamb & Lion Ministries, saying, "Look up, be watchful, for our Redemption is drawing near!"

End of Program