

An Introduction to Biblical Prophecy – Part 4

by Dr. John Ankerberg, Dr. John Weldon

Prophecy and Practical Living

The fifth reason that biblical prophecy is important is because it is an encouragement to godly living and evangelism. Millions of people today fear the future. Famous novelist Kurt Vonnegut expressed the despair of many when he said, “Things are going to get worse and worse and never get better again.”¹ Indeed, many of those who truly understand the world today are terrified. As we look around at our family, friends and neighbors, as we understand other’s concern with the future, we are encouraged to lead them to the One who controls the future. Only He can offer them hope in the face of life’s many uncertainties.

The Apostle Paul thus taught that prophecy in general brings certain things to men, including strength, encouragement and comfort (1 Cor. 14:3). This is why he commanded us, “Do not treat prophecies with contempt” (1 Thess. 5:20). Thus, those who know God do not fear the future because they know the One who controls the future, and that, come what may, they are safe in His hands. Indeed, the future belongs to those who belong to God (1 Cor. 3:21-23). That is true hope.

But knowledge of prophecy is also an encouragement to godly living. The Apostle Peter teaches that it is knowledge of prophecy itself that is the spur for Christians to “live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God” (2 Pet. 3:11-12). Here, the Apostle Peter is speaking of the Second Coming of Christ which he refers to as “the day of God” and yet it is precisely the events that precede and surround the Second Coming of Christ that are the subject of concern in eschatology. Those concerned with the Second Coming of Christ, then, are justified in being responsibly concerned with the subject of eschatology. Indeed, it is because of heeding prophetic events and our looking forward to them that we are to “make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him” (2 Pet. 3:14). Thus:

...a major value for Biblical prediction lay in its power to motivate its hearers toward holiness. Both the promises of divine blessing and the threats of impending judgment constituted urgent motivations to ethical conduct. As Girdlestone quipped, “The object of prophecy was not to excite surprise but to stimulate enterprise”, and as Peter tells us in Scripture, “Since all these things are to be...what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness” (2 Pet. 3:11)?²

The Apostle John says of those who believe in Christ's return, "Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure" (1 Jn. 3:3). Thus, perhaps more than any other teaching, it is the personal knowledge that Christ can return at any moment that provides commitment to Christ and His will, and encouragement and confidence for the future.

Charles Ryrie, Ph.D., Th.D., an acknowledged authority on biblical prophecy, observes:

The study of prophecy will do a number of things for the believer. (1) It will keep him from false doctrines and false hopes. (2) It will help to make the unseen real and create within the believer's life the very atmosphere of heaven. One cannot do other than worship in reading the Revelation, for instance. (3) It will give joy in the midst of tribulation and affliction (2 Corinthians 4:17). (4) It will increase one's loyalty to Christ and produce true, self-sacrificing service for Him. (5) When the believer fully realizes all the glory that is his future, it makes him satisfied to be nothing now. (6) Prophetic truth is the only thing which can give true comfort in the time of sorrow and bereavement (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). (7) All Scripture is profitable and prophecy is no exception for it will produce and encourage holy living (1 John 3:3).³

Finally, the study of prophecy is important because it will shape one's thinking and ultimately one's worldview. Dr. Robert Clouse, professor of history at Indiana State University argued that, "Many attitudes that a Christian has about society, the church and its purpose, education and culture, and even current events are conditioned by the sort of eschatology he holds."⁴

One of the great apologists of the 20th century, Dr. Wilbur Smith, agreed, "The view one finally takes on these subjects will have a tremendous influence over his whole outlook on world events, and his concepts of many factors relating to the second advent of our Lord."⁵

The above discussion reveals that the subject of prophecy is important to both believer and unbeliever alike. It is important because God says it is important. And regardless, no one can be unconcerned about the future end of the world. If *God* is the one who has purposely revealed such information, it is important that we know and understand what He says.

All this underscores the fact that it is the skeptics and the detractors of biblical prophecy who are uninformed concerning God's purposes for mankind, and not those who responsibly seek to listen to what He has prophetically declared. The unbeliever who fails to comprehend God's participation in world history, even to its conclusion, is the one that in the end, will wish he had paid better attention.

None can logically deny that where God *has* clearly spoken about the future, He wants His people – and even unbelievers – to know it. That is why the study of prophecy is important to each of us:

Christians should be interested in prophecy because of what God is. Either the world is out of God's control and His plan is nothing more than a patchwork quilt or He is absolutely sovereign and has a purpose and plan which He is carrying out (Isaiah 46:11). Parts of that plan which have been fulfilled serve to

demonstrate that He is the Truth, and thus that faith in prophecy is faith in God and in His plan...Sixteen books in the Old Testament and one twentieth of the New Testament are [characteristically] prophetic, and one certainly cannot neglect such a large portion of the Word of God. Surely it is not God's purpose that any of His Words should be slighted; it must not be ours.⁶

Although disagreements among schools of prophecy should not become an issue for determining fellowship among believers, and knowledge of prophecy is not necessary to salvation, none can deny its importance. Further, this subject must be addressed by churches that have ignored it, and also by those in the Church who wish it would go away.

In his excellent text, *The Interpretation of Prophecy*, Dr. Paul Lee Tan provides some instructive comments worth careful evaluation:

Prophecy in itself is not crucial to orthodoxy or salvation. It should, therefore, never be made an issue determining the lines of fellowship among Christians.... On the other hand, prophecy occupies such a sizable part of God's Word that it cannot remain for long in the sidelines. Sooner or later, the teaching and preaching ministries of the church will encounter Bible prophecy. What then? There is no sadder scene than to see leaders within a church group giving forth uncertain or contradictory sounds. The seeds of confusion are soon sewn.

A logical alternative under such a situation is to neglect or play down the significance of the prophetic Scripture, possibly by disclaiming full understanding of it this side of heaven. But by leaving such a large part of God's word untouched or interpreted cursorily, church leaders will be feeding a partial diet to their flock.

From the practical standpoint, therefore, a church group or Christian organization has the right – indeed an obligation – to assure uniformity among its leadership in at least the general scheme of prophecy.... When the leadership of the church is united in heart and spirit on the prophetic Scriptures, it affords Satan much less occasion to discount the Word of God in the church.

The call for unity in the area of prophecy is the more pressing when one realizes that prophecy not only occupies a major portion of Scripture, but tends to relate to almost all areas of God's Word. Prophecy is not confined to a specific portion of the Word. It extends its roots all over the Scripture. "Eschatological interpretations have a definite bearing upon many of the other doctrines which one holds. One's entire system of theology, view of history, interpretation of Scripture, view of the Church as an organism and as an organization in relation to other organizations, and view of Biblical theology is determined to a great extent by his view of eschatology".... Or, take the person and work of Christ. Since all major prophetic themes are related in some way either to the first or second advent of Christ, the neglect of prophecy means the neglect of some aspect of the person and work of Christ.

The importance of prophecy in the church, therefore, cannot be gainsaid.⁷

In conclusion, is it not true that the discussion above demonstrates that the subject of prophecy is an important one? If the topic of biblical prophecy is important to the lives of both believer and unbeliever alike, and also informs us of the destiny of the world itself – is there anyone who should ignore it? We don't think so.

Notes

- 1 Kurt Vonnegut, *Time*, March 18, 1974, p. 66.
- 2 J. Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy: The Complete Guide to Scriptural Predictions and Their Fulfillment* (NY: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 14.
- 3 Charles Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1972), pp. 15-16.
- 4 Robert G. Clouse, *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), p. 209.
- 5 Raymond Ludwigson, *A Survey of Bible Prophecy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1973), p. 7; cf., John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1972), pp. 16-17. For example, in discussing the different views of the millennium (that is, whether one takes a premillennial, amillennial or postmillennial view) Dr. John Walvoord observes:

“The millennial doctrine determines also large areas of Biblical interpretation which are not in themselves prophetic in character. The distinctions in dispensational dealings of God, the contrasts between the Mosaic period, Abrahamic promises, the present age of grace, and the unfulfilled prophecies about the coming kingdom are of major importance in Biblical interpretation and systematic theology. Many of these issues are largely determined by the millennial doctrine [one holds].... If the present purpose of God is to bring in a millennium through Christian influence and preaching [postmillennialism], that is one thing; if there is no millennium at all [amillennialism], that is another; if the millennium is yet to be fulfilled on the earth through the second coming of Christ [premillennialism], that is still another.... The growing recognition of the importance of the millennial doctrine is one of the principle causes of resurgence of interest in this field.” (Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, pp. 16-17.)
- 6 Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, p. 15.
- 7 Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Winona Lake, IN: Assurance Publishers, 1978), pp. 277-279.

