

An Introduction to Biblical Prophecy – Part 5

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Why Does God Tell Men Information About the Future?

Does God really want people to know the future? And if so, why does He want this?

The Apostle Paul informs us we are not to be ignorant concerning certain prophetic events, nor are we to become unsettled or alarmed concerning the existence of speculations and the false prophecies of some religious unbelievers which are certain to come (Acts 20:20, 26-31; 1 Thess. 4:13-5:6; 2 Thess. 2:1-6, 10, 18; cf. 2 Pet. 2:1).

Think for a moment. If God didn't believe that personal knowledge of the future was important, why would He have revealed it?

Consider just a few illustrations that show how practical the knowledge of prophecy can be. In the early Church, God "predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world" (Acts 11:28). This famine happened during the reign of Claudius and because of this prophecy, the early Christians were able to prepare for the famine and survive it.

Jesus' prediction of the coming massive destruction of Jerusalem (Lk. 21:20-24) "was so vivid that the early church in Jerusalem was able to escape almost certain destruction by fleeing the city before Titus destroyed it in A.D. 70."¹

The prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah both predicted the Jewish Babylonian captivity. Isaiah predicted it over 100 years in advance – when Babylon was such a third rate power that none could expect it to rise to prominence (Isa. 39:5-7). But Jeremiah predicted that this captivity would last only 70 years and, that afterwards, the Jews would be brought back into their homeland (Jer. 22:11-12, 25:8-14; 29:10-14, see Ezra 1:1-2:1; Ezek. 12:10-28).

Such information was undoubtedly of unparalleled comfort to the Jews who experienced captivity under the cruel hand of the Babylonians (see Daniel 9:2). We don't think anyone would argue that knowledge of such prophecy was unimportant or irrelevant to these individuals. Thus, just as important is the fact that the Bible predicts events that may concern everyone now living.

The most prophetic book in the New Testament is the book of Revelation which is 63% predictive.² At the beginning and end of the book, God Himself calls the one

who reads it and keeps its message blessed: “Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near” (Rev. 1:3).³

God never intended the book of Revelation as a puzzle for interpreters. What must not be forgotten is that most of the book *is a revelation*; that is how it received its name.

What is revelation? *Webster’s 20th Century Dictionary* defines revelation as “(1) a revealing, or disclosing; (2) something disclosed; disclosure; especially, a striking disclosure, as of something not previously known or realized; (3) in Christian theology, God’s disclosure or manifestation to His creatures of Himself and His will....”⁴ A revelation is thus intended to be understood.

Further, it must not be forgotten that this last book of the Bible claims to be a revelation *of Jesus Christ*. The book begins “The revelation *of Jesus Christ*...” and informs us it is “the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Rev. 1:1-2). Verse 1 also informs us that God gave this revelation for a specific purpose. He gave it to Jesus Christ Himself “to *show* His servants what must soon take place.” In other words, the *purpose* the book was given is to *reveal* future events. Jesus Himself emphasized that in His teaching He has “spoken openly to the world” (Jn. 18:20). No one can deny that the book of Revelation must be considered part of Jesus’ teaching.

Thus, even with its symbolism and imagery, we must expect the book to contain a great deal of plain, clear information. If it is read in a normal fashion and not spiritualized into a mystical book offering endless subjective interpretations, it is indeed a *revelation* of stupendous proportions. Dr. Weldon remembers well his first reading of this book as a new Christian. There was much he did not understand. But even as someone almost entirely uninformed about the Bible and Christianity, there was a good deal that was also plain and clear.

Jesus Himself ends the book of Revelation by emphasizing, “Behold I am coming soon! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book.... He who testifies to these things says, ‘Yes, I am coming soon’” (Rev. 22:7, 20).

The conclusion to all this would seem obvious. If God plainly taught that the book was given to *reveal* what “must take place” in the future and expects His servants to “keep the words of the prophecy in this book,” then God certainly intends the book to be understood. Over and over again, at least seven times we read the phrase, “He who has an ear, *let him hear* what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

God even issues a stern warning that no one is to dare tamper with the contents of this book. Apparently then, God does not think that the book requires revision to make it clearer; it says exactly what He wants it to say in the manner He wants it said:

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in

this book. He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon." (Rev. 22:18-20)

All this assumes that God Himself considers the content of this book very important and that He wants us to understand what it teaches. (Good commentaries on the book, like that of Walvoord, can be helpful to Christians who wish to take advantage of someone else's years of study on this book.)

But is there a specific reason God wants us to know the future? We think so. Again, when God offers predictions of future events, they are given with the express purpose of proving that He alone is the one true God of the earth and of encouraging faith in Him among both believer and unbeliever alike.

For example, in Ezekiel there are no less than **sixty five** occurrences or variations of the phrase "*Then they will know that I am the Lord.*"

When David predicted his completely unexpected victory over Goliath, he did it so that "the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel" (1 Sam. 17:46, cf. 47).

King Solomon declared that both prophecy and God's undying faithfulness to Israel were present "so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the Lord is God and that there is no other" (1 Kgs. 8:60, see v. 1-59).

Indeed, "Not one word has failed of all the good promises he gave...." (1 Kgs. 8:56) and "Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed" (Josh. 23:14). Obviously, only God can predict the future, and if the Bible predicts the future, then it must be written by God.

Jesus Himself also emphasized this theme of prophecy as something confirming our faith: "I am telling you now before it happens, so that when it does happen *you will believe* that I am He" (Jn. 13:19). "All this I have told you *so that you will not go astray....* But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth" (Jn. 16:1, 13). "I have told you now before it happens *so that when it does happen you will believe*" (Jn. 14:29). And, "I have told you this, so that when the time comes *you will remember* that I warned you" (Jn. 16:4; cf. Matt. 24:25; Mk. 13:23; 1 Pet. 1:11).

Consider another illustration of how God intends prophecy as evidence that He is the one true God. The Bible predicts that at some future point in history a massive military invasion of Israel will occur from the North, in which God will miraculously destroy the invading armies (Ezek. 38-39). God repeatedly emphasizes that the purpose for such prediction and fulfillment is so that all the nations of the world will know that He is the Lord:

... *The nations will know that I the Lord am the Holy One in Israel.* It [the invasion of Israel] is coming! It will surely take place, declares the Sovereign Lord. (Ezek. 39:7-8)

And so [in destroying those armies] I will show my greatness and my holiness, and *I will make myself known in the sight of many nations. Then they will know that I am the Lord.* (Ezek. 38:23)

Now consider the prophecies concerning the historic worldwide scattering and re-gathering of the Jews. Although prophesied 2,600 years ago, this prediction has

been and is still being fulfilled with the rebirth of Israel.

Then the nations around you that remain will know that I the Lord have rebuilt what was destroyed and have replanted what was desolate. I the Lord have spoken, and I will do it. (Ezek. 36:36, see verses 1-38)

...And I will settle you in your own land. *Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord. (Ezek. 37:14)*

...I will show myself holy through them in the sight of many nations. *Then they will know that I am the Lord their God, for though I sent them into exile among the nations, I will gather them to their own land, not leaving any behind. (Ezek. 39:27-28)*

Prophecy brings glory to God. Prophecy is one of the most credible evidences that the Bible really is God's Word. Prophecy is one of the greatest inducements to godly living.

A Warning

These facts reveal why the devil has fought so hard to discredit the subject of prophecy. Consider for example, the subject of eschatology as it relates to the end of the world – something more easily subject to speculation and distortion. Today there is an increasing conviction that we may be approaching specific “last days,”⁵ the period preceding the Second Coming of Christ. Unwarranted speculation will tend to increase as some individuals dogmatically seek to relate current events to biblical prophecy in a fashion that is unwise. What happens when the speculation proves incorrect? How often has the Bible been discredited in the eyes of both the unbeliever and believer alike by someone's dramatic claims concerning an “end time” event that soon proves false?

Many individual Christian leaders have given prophecies that turned out to be false. Some predicted the 1991 Iraq war was the beginning of Armageddon. A few Christian authors made daring predictions about the date of the rapture that soon proved false. They even changed their false predictions one or more times, only to be embarrassed again. All these false predictions – and there must be hundreds by now – undoubtedly encouraged thousands of naïve Christians at the time they were given, until they were proven false. Many people who accepted these predictions, who trusted them and made important decisions based on them, became discouraged and suffered loss when they did not come to pass.

Here is where some in the Church become like those in the cults – giving false prophecies that harm people and bring disrepute upon the faith one wished to uphold. Among the Jehovah's Witnesses, one reason the rate of mental illness, including suicide, is so high is because of the harm wrought by false prophecies. As Dr. Jerry Bergman pointed out in “Paradise Postponed...And Postponed: Why Jehovah's Witnesses Have a High Mental Illness Level”: “Those who are not part of the Watchtower often do not understand the critical significance that failed prophecy and erroneous teachings have in the lives of Witnesses.”⁶

But it not only happens in the lives of Jehovah's Witnesses. And it is not just the specific prophecies that are discredited by speculative date setting or other false

prophecies. For many unbelievers, the entire Bible and all it teaches is discredited. Right or wrong, what is discredited is not merely the prophecies, but the Book containing the prophecies.

Unfortunately, the Church itself has sometimes taken one of its most powerful weapons for apologetics, sanctification, and evangelism, and by sensationalism, date setting, and unwarranted speculation tarnished its reputation so that even many Christians avoid discussions of the subject. Yet these are the very people God most desires to be encouraged and blessed. Misuse of prophecy does not and cannot invalidate the importance of the subject. But it does have consequences.

Discarding prophecy merely because some people misuse it is equivalent to throwing the baby out with the bath water. No one argues that dirty bath water should not be discarded. But babies are too precious to throw away. The fact is, the prophecies are there, in detail, in black and white. They have been there for over two thousand years. They are precious. Approaching them with reverence, objectivity and careful scholarship is glorifying to God, edifying to the Church, and highly rewarding in personal study and evangelism.

Notes

- 1 John F. Walvoord, *Armageddon: Oil and The Middle East Crisis – What The Bible Says About The Future of The Middle East and of The End of Western Civilization* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990, rev.), p. 15.
- 2 J. Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy: The Complete Guide to Scriptural Predictions and Their Fulfillment* (NY: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 675.
- 3 cf. Sir Robert Anderson, *The Coming Prince* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1977 rpt., 10th ed.), p. 7.
- 4 Jean L. McKechnie, (Editorial Staff Supervisor), *Webster's Twentieth Century Dictionary Unabridged, 2nd Edition* (New York: World Publishing, 1971), p. 1550.
- 5 Biblically, the "last days" as a general term began with the first advent of Christ (see Acts 2:16-18).
- 6 *Christian Research Journal*, Summer, 1996, p. 40.