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1 THE IMPORTANCE OF PROPHECY

Early Edition was a popular television program in the 1990s that featured a young man who regularly received the next day's newspaper a day ahead of time. Because he always knew the future, this man's task in each episode was to save people from a tragedy or problem he had read about in tomorrow's paper. So if he knew a building was going to burn, he tried to keep people from entering it. Or if someone was going to be hurt by an act of violence or in an accident, he tried to prevent the encounter from taking place.

We who hold God's prophetic Word in our hands also have an "early edition" of future events. We have God's plan for all *eternity*, the unfolding of His eternal drama that will culminate for believers in the glories of heaven.

The reason we can even talk about prophecy is that we are dealing with the God who is omniscient, "all-knowing." He not only

knows what is and what has been, but He has equal knowledge of what will be. If God were any less informed about tomorrow than He is about yesterday or today, He would not be God.

Tomorrow is as real to God as today or yesterday because God is an eternal Being. In fact, time designations have no meaning to Him. That's why God identified Himself to Moses as "I AM" (Exodus 3:14). He is forever in the present tense, the now.

But because the eternal God has chosen to unfurl His plan for creation in time, prophecy—the study of future things—is very important.

Most of us have a natural desire to know the future, to try to find out what tomorrow will bring. That's why the phony psychic networks are raking in the money. They are preying on people's desire to put together the jigsaw puzzle of life, whether it's the collective history of a nation or an individual life. People want to know how things are going to unfold.

I don't know about anyone else, but if I want to know something about what the future holds, I want to get my information from a reliable source. I don't want to stake my life on what some horoscope writer says in the newspaper.

The main problem with these "prophets" of the future is that they are *false* prophets. They are feeding people lies because they don't have a clue about the future, either on the individual or the cosmic level. Even worse, sometimes they are demonically inspired.

Bible prophecy is not designed to satisfy our curiosity about tomorrow or the next day, nor is it designed to fill our heads with information so we can get together and debate the details of God's plan. Gaining information has its place in the study of prophecy. It's important that we understand as fully as we can what God is saying to us. But at the heart of God's purpose for prophecy is changing our hearts and affecting the way we live our lives.

So as we begin our study of the wonderful and complex revelation of God concerning prophecy, I want to help you see how important prophecy is. The last chapter of the Bible says:

I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God shall add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book. (Revelation 22:18–19)

This thing called prophecy is very serious business with God. Mess with His prophetic Word, and it will mess up your eternity. God's prophetic message is so important that He announced a curse on anyone who tampers with it.

Let me say right up front that I know everybody does not agree on every jot and tittle of God's prophetic program. There are various views within the Christian community about exactly when Jesus will come back and the shape His kingdom will take. But these varieties of interpretations, if they remain within the sphere of orthodoxy, do not have to hamper us from gaining a broad-based understanding of what God has in store for His people.

So let's get started on this fascinating, awe-inspiring subject by considering the importance of prophecy. In this chapter, we need to answer the question, What makes this study significant to your life right now, where you are? Why should you and I be vitally concerned about God's prophetic agenda? I want to do a brief overview that will give you some solid reasons for studying prophecy.

**PROPHECY HELPS
AUTHENTICATE THE BIBLE**

One of the questions people often ask is how we Christians can claim that the Bible is true as opposed to any other holy book. What makes the Bible distinct from other writings that claim to be from God?

The Bible's Prophetic Accuracy

There are many answers to that question, but one thing that sets the Bible apart is its prophetic accuracy. A large portion of biblical prophecy has already been fulfilled with flawless accuracy. Events that one author wrote about were fulfilled precisely hundreds of years later.

One of the classic examples is the prophecy of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem by the prophet Micah more than seven hundred years before the event (Micah 5:2; cf. Matthew 2:1–6). If Bethlehem had been a major metropolis in Israel, someone could argue it was a good guess. But Micah pinpointed an obscure village because he spoke the mind of God. The fulfillment of prophecies like this helps to validate the truth of the Bible.

Of course, Micah's prophecy is just one of several hundred biblical prophecies that were fulfilled in Christ's first coming alone. This validation of the Bible by prophecy is a strong argument to believe the many prophecies that are yet to be fulfilled.

The Divine Origin of Prophecy

In 2 Peter 1:20–21, the apostle wrote, “Know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” The accuracy of the Bible's predictions should not surprise us, because this was not human writers doing guesswork. Prophetic Scripture is accurate in all of its details because God moved the authors to record what was said.

Someone who was good with numbers and probabilities figured out that it would require 200 billion earths populated with 4 billion people each to come up with one person who could achieve 100 prophecies accurately without any errors in sequence.

In other words, it would be impossible. But the Bible contains

can change His plan, why should we do anything? Why not just sit back and take it easy, because what's going to happen is going to happen anyway?

The answer is that God's sovereignty does not relieve us of our human responsibility. We are still obligated to live righteously, because God is holy and just and cannot tolerate sin. And God will use our obedience to help accomplish His plan.

I realize there is plenty of mystery here, because God's knowledge of the future includes not only everything that actually happens, but everything that could potentially happen. God knows all possibilities in any circumstance, but He chooses what *will* happen according to His will and purpose.

What if the Nazis had won World War II and become rulers of the world? God knows exactly how things would have been different over the last fifty years. If Hitler had conquered the world, it would not have been a surprise to God.

The word *surprise* is not in God's vocabulary. He never says, "Oops, I missed that one." All possibilities are taken into consideration. God's plan takes in "the end from the beginning." There are no surprises in heaven—absolutely none!

Prophecy not only reveals the character of God in terms of His perfect knowledge and power, but also in terms of His purpose to bring Himself glory and bless His people. Paul said of his trials, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:18).

The apostle knew that the suffering God was allowing in his life would work out to God's greater glory and his greater reward. Paul could say this because he believed Christ's message about a future hope that was laid up for Paul, and "not only to [him], but also to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Timothy 4:8).

A knowledge of prophecy gives you confidence to trust God for what's ahead. If God knows tomorrow already because He has been there and taken care of it, then you can go to sleep tonight confident that He is in control.

Prophecy enhances our understanding of the character of God

and leads us to worship Him. Over and over again in his letters, Paul became so overwhelmed with God’s character that he couldn’t help but worship when he considered God’s powerful plan.

PROPHECY PROMOTES HOLINESS

A third reason for studying prophecy is that it is designed to promote holy living. The more conscious we are of Christ’s return, and of the fact that we could be standing face-to-face with Him at any moment, the more this knowledge will affect us. But if we forget that Jesus is coming back, we will start living like He’s not coming back.

John gave a classic statement of prophecy’s purifying purpose. “We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure” (1 John 3:2–3).

A Prize to Be Won

Let’s look at this issue in more detail since it is so crucial. Paul said, “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14). Paul was determined to remain faithful to Christ because there was a heavenly prize to be won when Christ returned.

God’s prophetic program included a reward for Paul, one that was worth all of his commitment on earth. And he urged all believers to adopt the same attitude (v. 15). There’s a lot we will do if there’s a big enough prize at the end of the process. Paul went on to explain his perspective: “Our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory” (vv. 20–21).

Paul said, “I’m really a citizen of heaven. I just have a temporary address here on earth.” Because Paul had such a high consciousness of eternity, he pressed on in history.

You can keep going, no matter what, when you know heaven is

real. You can keep going if you understand that when your human body becomes worm food, you have just begun to live.

A Hope to Be Realized

John said our hope of Christ's return should purify us. Paul agreed, writing in Titus 2:

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus. (vv. 11–13)

Notice the three distinct perspectives Paul mentioned here. Christians are people who are looking in three directions. We look back at the Cross and remember what Christ has done. We look inwardly to see what Christ is doing in us today. And we look forward to the day when Christ will return for us.

Do you see how consciousness of our tomorrow keeps us on track today? We should be living righteously as we await the final revelation of God's prophetic plan.

A Perspective to Gain

Peter also had something to say about the way prophecy ought to promote holy living:

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. Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God. (2 Peter 3:10–12a)

The Bible says if you fix your sights and your hope on Christ's coming, that perspective on tomorrow will keep you on the straight and narrow today. Prophecy can help us walk a straight line.

A Future to Prepare For

Paul also said he lived in light of one inescapable fact. Speaking of the judgment of believers for kingdom reward, or the lack thereof, he wrote, "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body" (2 Corinthians 5:10).

This is how I picture the judgment seat of Christ taking place. Most stores today have security cameras recording a customer's every move. Some stores even alert people to that fact as they enter the store.

When I first saw those signs, I wondered why the stores were advertising the fact that they used security cameras. After all, the idea is to catch a thief in the act. But as I thought about it, the reason for the warning signs became clear. People who know someone is watching their every move will probably think twice before trying anything funny. But if they don't think anyone is watching, they'll be more likely to take a chance and steal something.

Well, our lives are being recorded on God's cosmic video camera. At Christ's judgment seat, He will sit down with us to view the tape. That's pretty convicting, so let's move on. A bride doesn't wait until the wedding day to prepare for her marriage. She begins preparing far in advance in anticipation of that special day. When you have a prophetic mind-set, it will affect your preparation for eternity.

One of the things I hated most in school was the infamous "pop quiz." The problem with pop quizzes is the pop, not the quiz. You don't have time to prepare for a pop quiz because it is unannounced. I regularly asked the teacher, "Are we going to have a quiz tomorrow?" I wanted to take the "pop," the surprise, out of the quiz.

Jesus Christ has a "pop" return coming. We don't know the day

or the hour. But we *can* prepare for it by living every day as if it were the day of His return. Prophecy can help give us that prepared mind-set. It's important because it promotes holy living on the part of believers.

**PROPHECY BRINGS
STABILITY IN TRIALS**

Stability in times of difficulty is a fourth reason prophecy is important to us. Knowing what tomorrow holds for us can help us be strong in the storms of today.

A Calm in the Storm

In the Upper Room, as He celebrated the Last Supper with His disciples, Jesus told them He was about to leave them. Their response was, "How are we going to make it?"

To reassure His faithful followers, Jesus spoke these well-known words of comfort:

Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. (John 14:1–3)

Jesus' prophecy of His own return helped produce calm in the midst of the disciples' panic.

Good News in Grief

One of the best examples of the use of prophecy to calm troubled hearts is in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, another familiar passage in which Paul comforted the Thessalonians concerning their fellow Christians who had died.

Verses 13–17 are Paul’s teaching on the Rapture, the moment when Christ will return in the air to take His people home to be with Him forever. This is one of the great, central passages of prophecy in the Bible. Yet Paul wasn’t just dispensing doctrine. He closed this section by saying, “Therefore comfort one another with these words” (v. 18).

Hope for the Future

We’ve mentioned this benefit of studying prophecy, but let me come back to it. The prophetic Word of God also brings us encouragement and hope for the future.

The Thessalonian church was shaken by the death of some of its members, because the believers weren’t sure what had happened to these brothers and sisters. The church was also shaken by a false word from someone that the Day of the Lord had already come. Paul answered that charge and put their fears at ease:

Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gathering together to Him, that you may not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has already come. (2 Thessalonians 2:1–2)

Paul proceeded to give them details by which the Day of the Lord can be recognized, and we’ll cover these in a subsequent chapter. What I want you to see here is the way Paul used this teaching to restore their hope. He concluded in verse 15, “So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us.”

God wants to teach us about prophecy so we will stand firm today and not be thrown off by Satan or false teachers. If you’re not alert, people will throw you off. The devil will throw you off. They can make your knees wobble. But if you know God’s Word you have a firm hope to hold on to even in the changing wind of circumstances.

A Right View of Life

In 2 Corinthians 5:8, Paul said, “We . . . prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.” If you prefer heaven, you’ll make it on earth. But if you prefer earth, you’ll have a misperception of heaven. In other words, be heavenly. Colossians 3:2 says, “Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.” Your life should have such a heavenly dynamism about it that earth shrinks in significance.

The reason some of us aren’t making it here on earth is because this life is too big. We’ve made the world too big, Satan too big, and people too big. They are ruining our day.

There’s a lot to worry about today from a human standpoint. But if you have a firm grip on the fact that God has a prophetic program that nothing on earth can override, then you don’t have to have a coronary worrying about what might happen. Prophecy contributes to a right view of life.

**PROPHECY PROMOTES
WORSHIP AND PRAISE**

When he came to the end of Romans 11, Paul was concluding a complex discussion of God’s plan for Israel. We’ll have a lot to say about Israel in this book, because Israel is so key to the unfolding of prophecy. Here I just want to touch on a few highlights as we see how Paul concluded this section.

The Blessing of Our Position

Paul was clear in Romans 11:25–27 that God is not finished with Israel. His chosen people have a distinct place in His plan for the future. The world saw a partial fulfillment of this prophecy when the modern nation of Israel was born on May 14, 1948. No nation had ever before disappeared and come back with its native

language intact. This was a first in human civilization, and it happened because it was prophesied in the Bible.

Earlier in this chapter, Paul had pointed out that we as Gentiles are “grafted in” to God’s program and His blessings, the way wild olive shoots are grafted to an olive tree. We were grafted into God’s covenant with Abraham, so that we too might enjoy the spiritual blessings of the Abrahamic covenant.

Paul was building his case that the blessings Gentile believers enjoy are the result of being grafted in with Israel. We are beneficiaries of Israel’s blessings through Abraham.

The Praise for Our Position

With that privileged position of the Gentiles in mind, Paul then went on to say that someday Israel will be turned back to God and play a role in His prophetic plan.

Paul came to the end of this teaching, took one look back at the magnificent way God had worked to bring all things into harmony with His will, and was overwhelmed with awe and praise. “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!” (Romans 11:33).

For several more verses, Paul poured out his doxology to God. The apostle burst into praise when he grasped the plan of God for the future. He was so overcome with the greatness of God that he concluded, “For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen” (v. 36).

PROPHECY PROMOTES WITNESSING

At the beginning of this chapter I mentioned the television program *Early Edition*. When we study prophecy, we’re getting God’s “early edition” of world events. He’s letting us know what is going to happen tomorrow, and far beyond that.

But God does not tell us about the future so we can argue about

