

Economics In Prophecy

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***Forerunner*, "Prophecy Watch," July-August 2011**

Over the last few years, as the American debt crisis has deepened, the language of economics has become a part of our daily lives. The word "trillion"—though we can scarcely comprehend its magnitude—trips off the lips of politicians and newscasters as if such a vast quantity of money were mere pocket change.

Most of us have no problem distinguishing the difference between America's gargantuan "debt" and its growing annual "deficits." "Stimulus," "inflation," "quantitative easing," "unemployment compensation," "revenue enhancement," "unfunded mandates," and other economic lingo do not seem quite as arcane as they may once have.

Even so, the vast scope of the American economic disaster, which has affected many other nations due to their close ties to the United States, boggles the mind. It is not just that the federal debt is approaching \$15 trillion, but that private debt, which includes mortgage debt, consumer debt, and credit card debt, exceeds federal debt, a whopping \$16 trillion. Beyond that, America's unfunded liability—what the country ultimately owes to recipients of Social Security, Medicare, the Prescription Drug Program, etc.—is more than a staggering \$115 trillion! This tops the *world's* gross domestic product by about \$40 trillion.

These numbers are too huge to comprehend. They are easier to understand when we calculate the debt each American citizen would personally bear if it were divided out equally. Looking at it this way, every American's portion of the federal debt is roughly \$47,000. To this must be added his share of personal debt, which totals over \$51,000. Finally, he must also bear his portion of the unfunded liabilities, a sum of \$1,021,000. His total debt load, therefore, equals a crushing \$1,119,000! Paying this off at \$50,000 per year, it would take each citizen over 22 years to reimburse, provided that no new debt were accrued.

Debt is nothing new. Throughout history, governments have time and again outspent their treasuries. Many monarchs and countries have gone deeply into debt to finance wars of conquest and expansion. And it is not only wars that are expensive. Vast national building projects—palaces, temples, tombs, and even whole cities—have been undertaken on loans from wealthy usurers since the beginnings of finance, when taxation and plunder could not provide the means. Most of these nations—even whole empires—were weakened and fell, largely because of their vast debts.

Not just the aristocracies of nations dabbled in debt; many an average citizen, desirous of certain property, advancement, education, or some extravagance, went into arrears to fulfill his dreams. Others had little choice, plunging into debt after crop failure, business failure, war, drought, economic disaster, and sheer profligacy. Debtors often had to flee for their lives to find greener pastures elsewhere. Many nations imprisoned debtors, often under atrocious living conditions. The Bible does not turn a blind eye to such cases, allowing Israelites to sell themselves into slavery for a time when the circumstances of life turned sour (Exodus 21:2-11; Leviticus 25:39-40; II Kings 4:1; etc.).

Biblical Economics

It may be surprising to many Bible readers to learn that Scripture covers economics in great detail. From commanding just weights and measures (Leviticus 19:35-36) to regulating fines and punishments for stealing (Exodus 22:4, 7-8) to statutes concerning the charging of interest (Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:35-37), the Old Testament, especially, lays down many good principles of a sound economy. Beyond these, the larger principles of labor, management, taxation, tribute, property, trade, buying and selling, saving, inheritance, and many others are frequently mentioned in commands, narratives, psalms, and proverbs throughout God's Word.

We do not normally think of them as such, but at least four of the Ten Commandments—those regarding the Sabbath, stealing, lying, and coveting—regulate economics, and arguments could be made to add a few others to this list. Many of our favorite sayings from Jesus also have economic bases, as these from Matthew's gospel bear out:

- » "Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away." (Matthew 5:42)
- » "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." (Matthew 6:12)
- » "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal." (Matthew 6:19)
- » "You cannot serve God and mammon." (Matthew 6:24)
- » "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'" (Matthew 6:31)
- » "Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will." (Matthew 10:29)
- » "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it." (Matthew 13:45-46)
- » "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22:21)

In just these few sayings, Jesus alludes to borrowing, debt, saving, wealth, money, filling basic needs, buying and selling, investing, and taxation—all parts of a functioning economy. Parables like the Prodigal Son, the Sower and the Seed, the Talents, the Workers in the Vineyard, the Rich Fool, and the Unjust Steward take full advantage of the language of economics to illustrate their points. Jesus knew that economic issues, high on everyone's list of priorities, make excellent illustrations of higher, more spiritual lessons.

But what about prophecy? It only stands to reason that, if economic issues were important to people of Bible times and are equally important to those of us living in the end time, biblical prophecy would be concerned with economic issues, too, not just political and military matters. Somewhere in Bible prophecy, we should see indications of economic factors that cause, drive, and heighten end-time events. If we have concluded that, we would be correct.

From the Beginning

The inclusion of economics in prophecy begins early in Scripture, as early as the third chapter of Genesis. In this case, God curses Adam for his sin in the Garden of Eden (see Genesis 3:17-19), and it has profound consequences on the human condition. The curse dooms sinful mankind to hard labor to produce what he needs to live. He is pitted against nature in a brutal struggle for survival, and in the end, tired and worn by a lifetime of arduous toil, he returns to the earth having lived a futile life and accomplished little or nothing.

This part of the First Prophecy has profound implications on the course of human history. It implies that man's life will be focused on meeting his needs, subduing his environment, and trying to get ahead. He will have little time or energy left for more important pursuits, especially that of seeking God—and besides, as the next verses record, most of humanity would be cut off from God and His way of life. Human life, therefore, would be based in conflict, fear, aggression, and misery, making war, greed, lack, and death the rule, not the exception. As other verses show, this situation will get worse and worse until a time comes when, "unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved" (Matthew 24:22).

The book of Genesis also includes the promises God made to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as well as Jacob's prophecy of "what shall befall [the tribes of Israel] in the last days" (Genesis 49:1). The promises, which are in effect prophecies of God's blessing of the patriarchs' descendants, dwell on economics to a great extent. Even God's first promise to Abraham, "I will make you a great nation" (Genesis 12:2), intimates a large, prosperous, mighty people—a powerhouse of wealth and sway. The additions and clarifications of this promise in later chapters simply add increasing detail to this picture. God promises to give Abraham's people fertile lands, agreeable climate, fruitfulness, dominion, strategic holdings, etc.

Jacob's prophecy in Genesis 49 showers these blessings primarily on the sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh (Genesis 49:22-26), but gives royal power to Judah (verses 8-12) and blesses the other tribes with various specific gifts, some of which are economic in nature. Zebulun is prophesied to be "a haven for ships" (verse 13), meaning that its economy will be tied to the sea. Issachar (verses 14-15) will find itself in a pleasant land and will subject himself to others to remain there. Asher will be known for producing rich foods (verse 20), while Benjamin will have a reputation for violence and plunder (verse 27). All of these are economic indicators of the tribes' end-time locations and conditions.

All these "economic prophecies" are recorded in just one book of the Bible!

Excess at the End

Perhaps the next major prophecies dealing with economics are the well-known "Blessing and Cursing" chapters of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. In them, God promises good economic rewards for obedience to His commandments and dire punishments for forsaking Him. The economic blessings include precipitation, productivity, prosperity, peace, and power. Alternatively, if the Israelites turned to idols, they could expect terror, confusion, disease, defeat, drought, famine, infertility, invasion, enslavement, and exile. These chapters bear deep study because the nations of Israel, once blessed tremendously for Abraham's faithfulness, are now reaping the whirlwind for their sinfulness.

Less well-known than Jacob's blessing on Israel is Moses' blessing of the tribes just before his death (Deuteronomy 33). Like Jacob's blessing, Moses' blessing is a prophecy concerning the dispositions of the tribes down through history and includes some economic features. For instance, he asks God to bless Levi's substance (Deuteronomy 33:11), Naphtali will be "full of the blessing of the Lord" (verse 23), and Zebulun and Issachar, treated together, will "partake of the abundance of the seas" (verse 19). As in Genesis 49, the primary economic blessings go to Joseph (Deuteronomy 33:13-17).

The later prophets predict that various economic factors will be involved in the increasing troubles before the return of Jesus Christ. Many of these conditions mirror the situations faced by Israel and Judah in their respective declines and falls in Old Testament times, showing that economic elements accompany the political and military indicators that we are more likely to recognize.

For instance, in Isaiah 1:22, the prophet records that in Jerusalem, "Your silver has become dross." Though this speaks primarily of the people's spiritual condition, it certainly applies literally too. So, a sign of Judah's decline was the devaluation of her currency; money would not buy what it used to be able to purchase. The illustration pictures what had once been pure silver and of full value is now so diluted by baser metals that it is essentially worthless. The debasing of currency, then, becomes a recognizable precursor of decline and eventual national collapse.

The next chapter says that, just before the Day of the Lord, the Israelites' "land is also full of silver and gold, and there is no end to their treasures; their land is also full of horses, and there is no end to their chariots" (Isaiah 2:7). Israel at the end is tremendously wealthy, and everyone in the land lives like a king. The people have so many vehicles that they seem to cover the whole country! Does this sound familiar?

Isaiah 3:16-23 describes the wealth, finery, and attitudes of Israelite women as the end nears, and it does not paint a pretty picture (see also Amos 4:1-3). He depicts them as "haughty" and "wanton" with more clothes, jewelry, makeup, and accessories than they know what to do with! Economically, the passage indicates a society of so much wealth and leisure that its women are indulged and free to pursue their desires to excess.

Just a few chapters away, in Isaiah 5:8, God pronounces a "woe [on] those who join house to house; they add field to field, till there is no place where they may dwell alone in the midst of the land!" His curse is against those who buy land in great swaths and develop huge housing tracts on them, giving each family little room to live. He promises in the next verse that many of those houses will lie empty, and all that land will yield little profit.

This is just a sampling of the economic elements brought out in Old Testament prophecy. Nearly every chapter brings out some detail—sometimes major, sometimes minor—regarding the financial circumstances we should see at the end time.

In the New Testament Too

While the New Testament has by comparison only a handful of passages that can be considered purely prophetic in nature (that is, the Olivet Prophecy, I Corinthians 15, II Thessalonians 2, the book of Revelation, etc.), we should not limit our search for economic prophecies to these areas. Sometimes an economic element will pop up in a parable or an admonition when we least expect it. For example, Paul inserts "lovers of money" and "lovers of pleasure" in his list of attitudes of people of the last days in II Timothy 3:1-5.

The Olivet Prophecy (Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 21) mentions very little about economic conditions at the end time. Jesus speaks of famines as a sign of His coming (Matthew 24:7; called the Third Seal in Revelation 6:5-6), and scarcity of food often results from declining economic circumstances. Later in the prophecy, Jesus speaks of conditions before His return being like "the days of Noah," describing them as a time when people will be conducting their affairs as normal, unaware of the great calamity that is about to befall them (Matthew 24:37-39). He goes on to speak of people "taken" in the midst of their everyday work (Matthew 24:40-41). He does not seem to describe a situation of total economic breakdown.

Of course, the book of Revelation is the New Testament's main prophetic source. Because it often deals in symbols, some of its economic allusions are somewhat obscure. For instance, Jesus castigates the Pergamos church for "hold[ing] the doctrine of Balaam" (Revelation 2:14), who hired out to Balak to curse Israel for money, so Balaam's doctrine may have to do with preaching lies for financial gain. The problem of the church of the Laodiceans has its basis in their thinking that they are "rich" (Revelation 3:17).

Revelation 13:16-18 contains the infamous "mark of the beast," which allows those who accept it to "buy and sell," making it an economic necessity to those who have no faith in God. Many of the plagues of the last days will cause severe economic disasters all over the world, and the fall of Babylon, described in Revelation 18, triggers worldwide mourning as leaders, businessmen, and people of every class watch the whole system crash before their eyes. Yet, after Christ's return, bringing on the Millennium and later the New Heavens and New Earth (see Revelation 21-22), the world will enjoy true prosperity for all eternity under God's rule.

This quick survey of economics in biblical prophecy should make us aware of the importance of watching for economic clues in God's Word. The world's economy is a huge factor in the geopolitics of nations, and this state of affairs will certainly continue until the return of Christ. It bears our keeping a close eye on it.